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THE WOLVERINE
COVERING UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN SPORTS

FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2026
VOLUME 38, NO. 1
ISSN 1048-9940

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The Wolverine is published monthly. A one-year (12 issues) subscription is $74.99. **The Wolverine Football Preview** edition is printed by Walsworth in St. Joseph, Michigan.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to **The Wolverine**, P.O. Box 2331, Durham, NC 27702.

Periodical postage paid at Durham, NC 27702 and additional offices.

For advertising or subscription information, call 1-800-421-7751 or write **The Wolverine**, P.O. Box 2331, Durham, NC 27702. **The Wolverine** is a publication of Coman Publishing Co., a division of On3 Sports LLC., located at 922 Broad St., Suite D, Durham, NC 27705.

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PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

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Kyle Whittingham, Year 1 — Talented Team, But Question Marks

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2026 Michigan Football Schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	SITE	TIME	TV	SERIES HISTORY
Sep. 5	**WESTERN MICHIGAN**	**Ann Arbor**	**7:30 p.m. ET**	**NBC**	U-M leads, 8-0
Sep. 12	**OKLAHOMA**	**Ann Arbor**	**Noon ET**	**FOX**	Oklahoma leads, 2-0
Sep. 19	**UTEP**	**Ann Arbor**	**3:30 p.m. ET**	**BTN**	First meeting
Sep. 26	**IOWA**	**Ann Arbor**	**TBA**	**TBA**	U-M leads, 45-15-4
Oct. 3	at Minnesota	Minneapolis, Minn.	TBA	TBA	U-M leads, 78-25-3
Oct. 17	**PENN STATE**	**Ann Arbor**	**TBA**	**TBA**	U-M leads, 17-10
Oct. 24	**INDIANA**	**Ann Arbor**	**TBA**	**TBA**	U-M leads, 62-11
Oct. 31	at Rutgers	Piscataway, N.J.	TBA	TBA	U-M leads, 9-1
Nov. 7	**MICHIGAN STATE**	**Ann Arbor**	**TBA**	**TBA**	U-M leads, 75-38-5
Nov. 14	at Oregon	Eugene, Ore.	TBA	TBA	Series tied, 3-3
Nov. 21	**UCLA**	**Ann Arbor**	**TBA**	**TBA**	U-M leads, 8-3
Nov. 28	at Ohio State	Columbus, Ohio	Noon ET	FOX	U-M leads, 62-53-6
Dec. 5	Big Ten Championship	Indianapolis, Ind.	8 p.m. ET	FOX	

*Schedule subject to change; Home games at Michigan Stadium in **bold***

PHOTOS BY LON HORWEDEL

Right Man, Right Time

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Schedule Is Tough, But Michigan Will Be Tougher

The nameplates change. The faces change. Michigan's goal remains the same: put the toughest, hardest-edged football team on the field, every game.

No exceptions. No excuses. When your program has won more football games than any in the history of the college sport, there's no reason to think differently.

Kyle Whittingham gets it. He embraces it. The Utah football icon for more than two decades jumped at the chance to be the boss of The Big House. More than that, he leaped at the opportunity to get on the hottest stage in all of college football and try to nail down a national championship.

Think he's at all intimidated by the prospect? Think again. Whittingham stared down Jim Harbaugh in Harbaugh's Michigan coaching debut — and won. He's taken on countless other top-level squads and come out victorious.

New head coach Kyle Whittingham calls Michigan "one of the pinnacles of college football."

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

He ditched Utes red for Michigan blue without even a glance back. Now the 66-year-old feels like a 26-year-old when it comes to getting after it at this level of competition.

"It's awesome to be here," Whittingham stressed. "I mean, this place is incredible. The athletes you have to work with. The tradition. The resources.

"I mean, it's all here. And so, it's a great opportunity, great challenge at the same time. The competition, obviously — the bar's been raised in that respect in every area, recruiting, everything. But this is one of the pinnacles of college football."

Michigan reached the pinnacle just two years ago. But in the wake of Harbaugh's departure, it spun down into first underachieving, and finally becoming the butt of a very bad joke last December. Whittingham changed all that — instantly. The Wolverines picked off not only a hugely successful, deeply experienced, extremely respected head coach, but an entire crew — from coordinators Jason Beck and Jay Hill to strength and conditioning guru Doug Elisaia, offensive line coach Jim Harding, etc. — that rates among the best in the business.

Their emphasis makes even the statue outside the entrance to Schembechler Hall break into a grin.

"We want to be mentally and physically tough," Whittingham assured. "And when you come to play us, you know you've been in for a physical contest."

The new staff in Ann Arbor aches to be in a championship battle at some point. It may not come this fall, while they're still putting all the pieces together. Then again, don't count them out for at least a shot at the Playoff. They're looking around at a level of talent that's next level, in many ways.

And the opportunity? Just give us a shot, they say.

"That was the biggest thing," Beck said, regarding the gravitational pull toward the winged helmet. "Michigan is a place that, if you sat down and looked at who could really have a chance to put it all together and win the whole thing, Michigan is one of those schools. There are probably 12 schools in the country that really have that.

"That's what kind of made it the no-brainer opportunity to be here, with the talent, the opportunity to have that type of season."

The type of season this one becomes has everything to do with what happens the rest of the summer, according to someone who reached the top of the mountain in 1997. Jon Jansen insists Michigan's autumn excellence will be determined by summer sweat.

"The ceiling is the College Football Playoff," Jansen said. "I don't know if that means they win a national championship. They've got the talent. There are a lot of variables involved, and some of them we don't even know about right now. They've got the talent, they've got the depth. Curt Cignetti has kind of thrown out the *you can't do it with a new system* argument. He didn't win it in Year 1, but he won it in Year 2.

"Coach Whittingham is inheriting much more talent than Cignetti did in Bloomington. He brought some guys. With the freshman class and the transfers, over half your roster is new, to this offense, to this building, to Michigan football. How do you get those guys to jell and become a team? It goes back to setting those expectations.

"So, the ceiling is College Football Playoff. The better question — one I don't have an answer for yet — is when you get into fall camp, what work has been done between now and fall camp? That is what is going to give you the access to the ceiling. Right now, we know what the floor could be. The floor is probably seven wins. That goes with the schedule, the health of other rosters, the health of our roster."

Here's what he does know.

"All the best coaches I've been around, their way is non-negotiable," Jansen said. "I like the fact that Coach Whittingham has set an expectation for the players of going to class, being on time, no cell phones in meetings, doing all the little things. It sets a tone, and they're non-negotiable."

Leaders and best. That's non-negotiable as well. If you don't meet the standard, you find out fast. This crew doesn't just hope to meet it, but expects to do so. ❑

Senior writer John Borton has been with *The Wolverine* since 1991. Contact him at jborton@thewolverine.com and follow him on X (Twitter) @JB_Wolverine.

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Michigan's Team 147 Embraces Culture Under Kyle Whittingham

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

A sense of belief comes with working or playing for Kyle Whittingham, Michigan's 22nd head coach. In the days following his hiring, one by one, coaches with whom he has a past relationship jumped on board the Wolverine staff. Transfers committed, including four from Utah. Michigan players in the portal withdrew.

Months later, those in Schembechler Hall are glad they did.

If there's anything Whittingham knows how to do after 21 years as the head coach at Utah, it's build and run a successful program. That includes in today's era, evidenced by the Utes winning 11 games in 2025.

"What's exciting to me is the alignment of this team," junior running back Jordan Marshall said. "Last year, I don't think we were so aligned — we could be in different spots last year — and we went 9-3 [in the regular season]. What happens when we're all aligned, going in the same direction?"

That's the big question for everyone on the outside that's curious about how Whittingham will do.

For now, they're working. Michigan players didn't realize how much the level of discipline and accountability had slipped under Sherrone Moore until they saw what a high standard really looked like again.

Early-morning workouts that are tougher than ever, requirements of arriving early to meetings and penalties for skipping class are all aspects Whittingham and his staff have brought.

"I would say it's kind of similar to [former head] Coach [Jim] Harbaugh's regimen," said graduate safety Rod Moore, who's entering his sixth season at U-M. "It's a lot stricter than the past two years, and the weight room has been a night-and-day difference. We feel a lot stronger, a lot more progress.

"Something new that we have now is that whenever we start meetings, there's a loud air horn that goes off throughout the whole building. We've already started our meetings. The past two years, we would start the meeting at 2:30, but now we start the meeting at 2:25, even though it's a 2:30 meeting. Everyone is five minutes early. The coaches are holding everyone accountable in the meetings and about going to class. There's a lot more accountability of going to class. Just the little things that make a team great, not just the big, broad things that everyone sees."

Whittingham's culture-building efforts include greater accountability and a work ethic that pervades the entire program.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

The 147th Michigan football team is proving that, even in 2026, players *want* to be pushed to reach a high bar, not coddled.

"We will not become you. You will become us and do things the way that we do things," Whittingham said of his approach to player buy-in.

"It's something, obviously, I've been a little used to, but to see him introduce it to a whole new team like this — I think it's going well, and it's cool to see," said senior defensive tackle Jonah Lea'ea, one of the transfers from Utah. "There's been a positive response. Something that Coach Whitt is emphasizing is accountability, and that's something the past players asked for. It's showing up, and I think everyone is handling it pretty well."

"It's been a smooth process, actually," added senior defensive back Smith Snowden, another Utah transfer. "Coach Whitt has been doing it for so long, and he has a good hang of it. Everyone on the team is getting a taste of the culture, the schedule and what it's supposed to look like.

"Everyone is bought in. This is a team of competitors — guys who want to win and compete at the highest level."

The advice Snowden has given teammates about playing for Whittingham: "Work hard." However, it hasn't borne repeating very often, because the returning players have fully embraced the culture.

Through hard work, and some recreational time like an early-June retreat in Charlevoix, Mich., they're forming strong bonds.

"We went through a lot, but I think we're going to be more player-led this season. I feel like we are more of a team now," sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood said.

A Detroit native, Underwood has 13 starts under his belt and has become one of the top leaders on the team. He also has a group of leaders around him, including the Utah transfers, Marshall, Rod Moore, who has the chance to be the program's first-ever three-time captain, and others.

"I guess I look at it as a test run," Underwood said of his freshman year. "I knew I had a lot to learn and that there would be ups and downs.

"I'm just glad the team welcomed me in and helped me grow as a leader. I knew overall they believed in me, and that helped me never lose belief in what I was doing. I looked at it as we were building together, and we're going to keep building."

The last coach wasn't fired due to on-field performance. Whittingham didn't come to Ann Arbor for a complete rebuild. The Wolverines have one of the most talented rosters in the Big Ten, and they expect to win right away.

"I love pressure. I thrive on it," Whittingham said. "Doesn't bother me a bit. If you don't like the pressure or can't handle it, you're in the wrong profession." ❑

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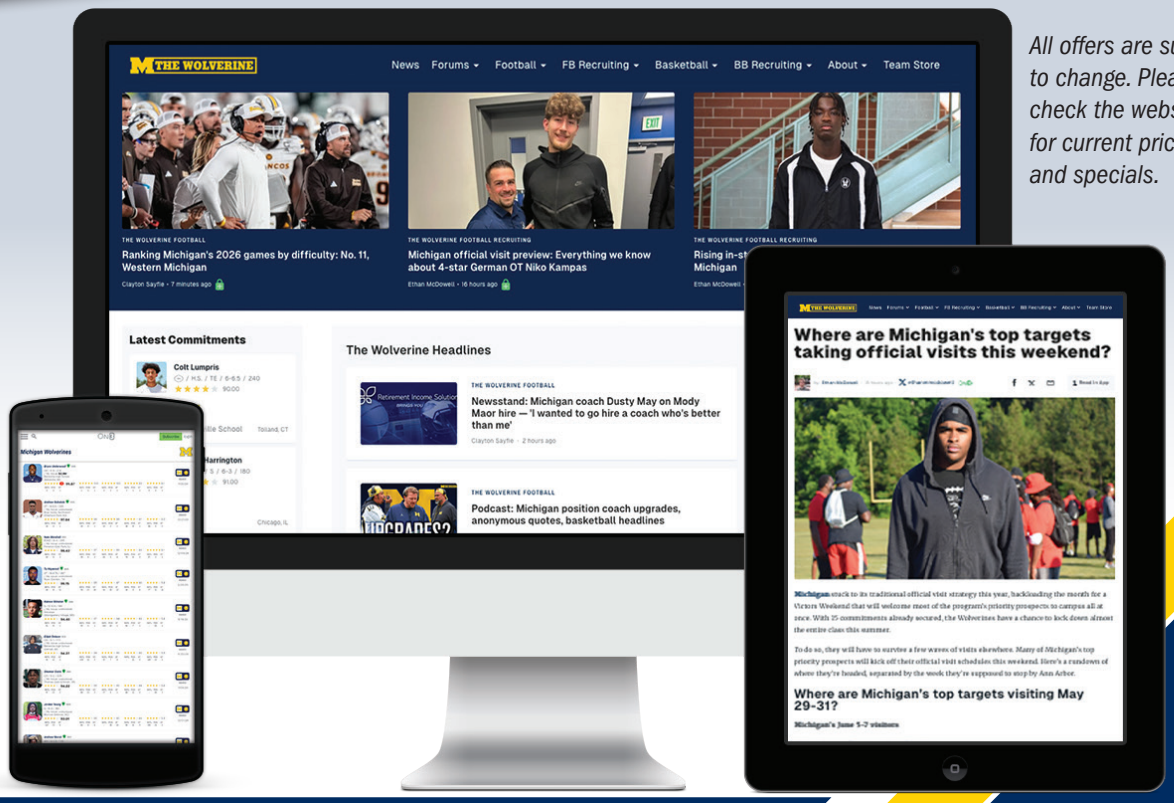
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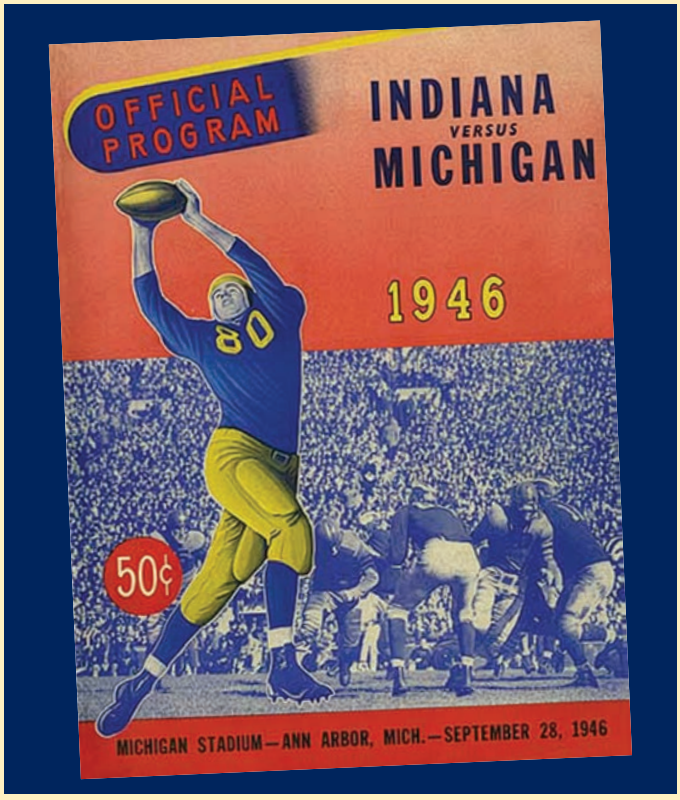
Michigan Maintains Lead In All-Time Wins



Michigan will host defending CFP national champion Indiana on Oct. 24 this season. The Hoosiers have the second-most losses (715) in Division I college football history, including a 21-0 defeat to the Wolverines in 1946.
PHOTO COURTESY BENTLEY HISTORICAL LIBRARY

Michigan's 9-4 record pushed its program win total to 1,021 all time, still leaving it atop the standings as the winningest program in college football. However, the Wolverines slid to No. 4 in win percentage just one season after falling to third. Notre Dame edged into the No. 3 spot with Alabama moving up to No. 2. Alabama had previously been passed by U-M in the second slot after the 2023 season with U-M's 15-0 record and College Football Playoff national championship.

Ohio State leads all-time in win percentage (.73659), followed by Alabama (.73307), Notre Dame (.73285), Michigan (.73221) and Boise State (.72419), rounding out the top five.

— Anthony Broome

Michigan Holds Firm In All-Time Big Ten Standings

Oregon continued its strong start to its Big Ten membership, currently atop the all-time standings in terms of winning percentage, with an asterisk of two years of data compared to decades for most other programs. Despite Indiana's 16-0 season and sweep of the Big Ten and national titles, it still sits in second-to-last place among the 18 teams in the all-time standings. Expected to remain a national power under Curt Cignetti, the Hoosiers could be poised for a move up in the years to come.

Michigan stayed in the No. 3 slot with its performance in 2025, trailing the Ducks and rival Ohio State Buckeyes.

— Anthony Broome

The official record book on NCAA.org includes records as senior college only, minimum 25 years in Division I. Bowl and playoff games are included, and each tie game is computed as half won and half lost. The tiebreaker rule began with the 1996 season.

Division I FBS All-Time Wins Leaders

Rk.	School	Years	W	L	T	Change
1.	***Michigan***	***146***	***1,021***	***362***	***36***	—
2.	Ohio State*	136	990	337	53	—
3.	Alabama*	131	985	345	43	—
4.	Notre Dame*	136	972	341	42	—
5.	Texas	133	971	398	33	—
6.	Oklahoma	131	960	351	53	—
7.	Penn State	139	950	418	41	—
8.	Nebraska	136	931	436	40	—
9.	Georgia	132	904	434	54	—
10.	USC*	132	891	378	54	—

Division I FBS All-Time Winning Percentage Leaders

Rk.	School	Games	Win%	Record	Change
1.	Ohio State*	1,380	.73659	990-337-53	—
2.	Alabama*	1,373	.73307	985-345-43	—
3.	Notre Dame*	1,355	.73285	972-341-42	Up 1
4.	***Michigan***	***1,419***	***.73221***	***1,021-362-36***	***Down 1***
5.	Boise State	707	.72419	511-194-2	—
6.	Oklahoma	1,364	.72324	960-351-53	—
7.	Texas	1,402	.70435	971-398-33	—
8.	USC*	1,323	.69388	891-378-54	—
9.	Penn State	1,409	.68879	950-418-41	—
10.	Nebraska	1,407	.67591	931-436-40	—

**Ohio State had 12 victories from 2010 vacated; Alabama had eight victories and one tie forfeited from 1993, plus 21 victories vacated from 2005-07; Notre Dame had 21 victories vacated from 2012 and 2013; and USC had 14 victories vacated from 2004 and 2005.*

All-Time Big Ten Standings

Rk.	School	Years	G	W	L	T	Pct.
1.	Oregon	2	29	26	3	0	.8965
2.	Ohio State	112	782	576	182	24	.7519
3.	***Michigan***	***119***	***805***	***562***	***225***	***18***	***.7093***
4.	Penn State	33	282	178	106	0	.6312
5.	USC	2	27	17	10	0	.6296
6.	Washington	2	26	15	11	0	.5769
7.	Michigan State	73	573	307	257	9	.5436
8.	Wisconsin	130	859	412	406	41	.5035
9.	Iowa	126	801	377	400	25	.4857
10.	Minnesota	130	841	389	424	28	.4792
11.	Purdue	130	821	364	443	32	.4529
12.	Nebraska	15	137	61	72	0	.4453
13.	Illinois	130	869	389	466	32	.4566
14.	Northwestern	130	858	312	524	22	.3765
15.	UCLA	2	24	8	16	0	.3333
16.	Maryland	12	108	35	76	0	.3241
17.	Indiana	126	795	241	532	31	.3190
18.	Rutgers	12	113	28	85	0	.2477

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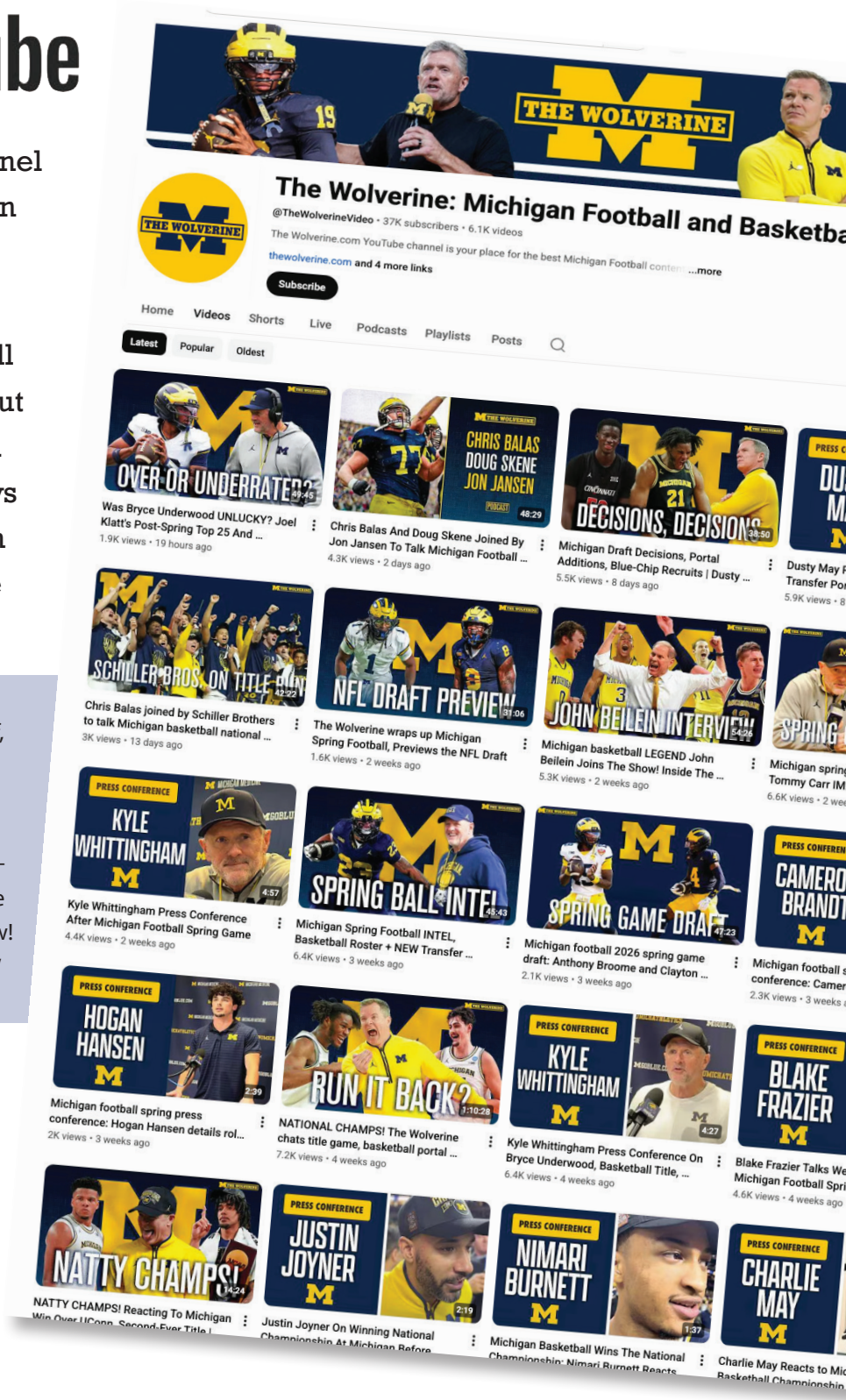
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Charlie May Reacts to Mic Basketball Championship

Kyle Whittingham

BY THE NUMBERS

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

Whittingham compiled a 177-88 record with 18 winning seasons in 21 years as head coach at Utah. He has the third-most wins among active Power Four head coaches, behind only Iowa's Kirk Ferentz (213) and Clemson's Dabo Swinney (187).

PHOTO COURTESY UTAH ATHLETICS

2 Days after Michigan fired previous head coach Sherrone Moore, Kyle Whittingham stepped down at Utah, but not by design — "the stars aligned," the coach said. Fourteen days into U-M's search for Moore's replacement, Whittingham was announced as the new head man.

3 Appearances as a player with the Los Angeles Rams in 1987 as part of the replacement team during the NFL strike. He also earned an opportunity with the Denver Broncos in 1982 but didn't see game action, and competed for multiple seasons in the USFL with the Denver Gold (1983) and New Orleans Breakers (1984).

3-0 Against Michigan while leading the Utah Utes with wins over three head coaches — Rich Rodriguez (25-23 in 2008), Brady Hoke (26-10 in 2014) and Jim Harbaugh (24-17 in 2015). Whittingham has been a part of every Michigan-Utah game in history, also serving as defensive coordinator in a 10-7 Wolverines win in Ann Arbor in 2002.

4 Probable College Football Playoff berths for Utah *if* the current 12-team format had been in place for Whittingham's 21 seasons at his previous stop (2008, 2019, 2021, 2022).

5-4 Record for Whittingham against Big Ten programs while the head coach at Utah, with three of the victories coming against the Wolverines. He also beat UCLA (2025) and Indiana (2016) and fell to Northwestern (2018, '23), Ohio State (2021) and Penn State (2022). It's worth noting that he is 3-0 against USC coach Lincoln Riley.

8 Consecutive years with his Utah defense finishing in the top 30 in the nation in total defense from 2017-24, including a No. 2 placement in 2019 (269.2 yards per game).

9th Is where Whittingham appeared on The Athletic writer Bruce Feldman's ranking of the top college football head coaches entering the 2026 season, following Indiana's Curt Cignetti, Georgia's Kirby Smart, Ohio State's Ryan Day, Alabama's Kalen DeBoer, Miami's Mario Cristobal, Oregon's Dan Lanning, Notre Dame's Marcus Freeman and Clemson's Dabo Swinney.

10 Unanimous or consensus All-Americans for Whittingham as Utah's head coach. He mentored players that stacked up 105 first-team all-conference honors.

11-6 Bowl game record for Whittingham as head coach at Utah, including a 2-2 mark in New Year's Six games with wins over Pitt (2005 Fiesta Bowl) and Alabama (2009 Sugar Bowl). He also led the Utes to an 11-6 record against rival BYU, which included nine consecutive wins against the Cougars in games played between 2010-19.

12th Of 32 FBS head-coaching hires for this year's carousel is where Whittingham-Michigan ranked on ESPN writer Bill Connelly's list. Connelly categorized the move as "perfectly

sensible," with an "A- or B+" grade.

"He's 66-years-old, and the 'chip-on-shoulder hard-ass takes over a roster of blue-chippers' thing doesn't always translate particularly well," Connelly explained. "But when you have to unexpectedly fire your head coach after a lot of vacancies have already been filled (and after a lot of potential candidates have signed lucrative extensions), you could do a lot worse than a guy with two decades' worth of head coaching experience and 177 career wins at a school that doesn't typically win at that level."

No. 12 Is where Whittingham checked in on ESPN's list of the top college head coaches as players, given that he was named WAC Defensive Player of the Year in 1981 and spent time at the professional level. He stood behind only Colorado's Deion Sanders, Bowling Green's Eddie George, Tennessee's Josh Heupel, Texas' Steve Sarkisian, Oklahoma State's Mike Gundy, UCLA's DeShaun Foster, Michigan State's Jonathan Smith, UAB's Trent Dilfer, UCF's Scott Frost, South Alabama's Major Applewhite and Hawai'i's Timmy Chang.

13-0 Record for Utah in 2008, capped off by a 31-17 victory over Alabama in the Sugar Bowl. That stands as one of two undefeated seasons in Utes history, and the 13 wins are the most the program has ever achieved. Four seasons after going 12-0 under Urban Meyer in 2004, Whittingham proved that Utah wasn't going anywhere.

18 Winning seasons in 21 years at Utah, with eight double-digit campaigns. He had 10 consecutive winning seasons from 2014-23, before going 5-7 in 2024 and bouncing back with 10 regular-season victories in 2025.

32 Seasons at Utah, including 21 as the head coach from 2005-25. Whittingham has coached in only two states — Utah and Idaho. He got his start as a graduate assistant at BYU from 1985-86, before moving on as the defensive coordinator at Eastern Utah (1987) and in multiple roles at Idaho State (1988-93). He joined the Utah staff as defensive line coach in 1994 and didn't leave until stepping down and taking the Michigan job. Before leaving Utah, he was the second-longest actively tenured head coach in college football, behind only Iowa's Kirk Ferentz.

60 NFL Draft picks for Utah during Whittingham's tenure as head coach. He produced six first-round picks — DT Star Lotulelei in 2013 (No. 14 overall, Carolina Panthers), OL Garrett Bolles in 2016 (No. 20, Denver Broncos), LB Devin Lloyd in 2022 (No. 27, Jacksonville Jaguars), TE Dalton Kincaid in 2023 (No. 25, Buffalo Bills), and OL Spencer Fano (No. 9, Cleveland Browns) and Caleb Lomu (No. 28, New England Patriots) in 2026.

177-88 Record at Utah, making Whittingham the winningest head coach in program history. His .668 winning percentage ranks second (25 or more games coached), behind only Ike Armstrong (.804 from 1925-49). His 177 wins are the third-most among active Power Four coaches, behind only Iowa's Kirk Ferentz (213) and Clemson's Dabo Swinney (187).

1959 Was when Kyle David Whittingham was born (Nov. 21) in his hometown of San Luis Obispo, Calif., to parents Fred and Nancy.

1984 Graduate of BYU, where Whittingham also earned a master's degree in 1987.

2019 National Coach of the Year, earning the Bobby Dodd Trophy. That was one of three national coach-of-the-year honors he has received in his career, also winning the AFCA and Bear Bryant awards in 2008. ❑

Whittingham went 3-0 against Michigan while leading the Utah Utes. He notched wins against three different U-M head coaches — Rich Rodriguez (25-23 in 2008), Brady Hoke (26-10 in 2014) and Jim Harbaugh (24-17 in 2015).

PHOTO COURTESY UTAH ATHLETICS

PHOTO BY TY KORNBLUE

2nd Is where wide receiver **ANDREW MARSH** ranked among FBS true freshmen. His 651 receiving yards in 2025 fell behind only Miami's Malachi Toney (1,211). That total set the Wolverines' true freshman record.

"We're really looking forward to coming out this year and showing everybody what we can do. Obviously, last year wasn't the best. It wasn't really Michigan's standard. So, this year we really want to make sure that we accomplish that."

— Sophomore wide receiver Andrew Marsh

"Listen, you guys know how I feel about Kyle Whittingham. This is one of the best coaches in America. He really is. And Michigan is in good hands. Now, could they win the Big Ten? I don't know. There are some loaded teams at the top, and they're going to be at the very top of these rankings. But this could be a good football team, and I think it's going to come down to those most important games, the home games, Oklahoma and Indiana, and then obviously that big one at the end, Ohio State."

— FOX analyst Joel Klatt

8 Home games for Michigan in 2026 for the eighth time this century, joining the 2024 (7-5 regular-season record), 2022 (12-0), 2016 (10-2), 2011 (10-2), 2009 (5-7), 2007 (8-4) and 2005 (7-5) campaigns.

NUMBERS AND QUOTES

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

1,021

Wins for Michigan since the program began in 1879, the most in college football history. The Wolverines have more victories than any football team at any level — high school, college or professional.

4th Nationally in total offense for Utah under coordinator Jason Beck last season. Beck, who joined Kyle Whittingham at Michigan, saw his unit finish second in rushing (266.3 yards per game) and 82nd in passing (216.6).

PHOTO COURTESY MICHIGAN FOOTBALL

11.5 Sacks for senior defensive end **JOHN HENRY DALEY** in 11 games at Utah last year, tied as the seventh most in the nation. The 6-foot-4, 255-pounder was tabbed as a first-team All-American by the Walter Camp Football Foundation. Daley also was one of two Michigan defensive players to be named to the Lott IMPACT Trophy Watch list, joining former Utah teammate Smith Snowden.

"The decision to come to Michigan was not hard at all. Coach Whitt called me and said, 'Hey, I think I have this opportunity. What do you think?' I said, 'Coach, I'm in, because it's Michigan.' I believe we can win national championships here. I believe we can win consistent Big Ten championships here. With the way Coach Whitt coaches, his discipline and toughness, I just think it's a perfect match for Michigan. I was in."

— Defensive coordinator Jay Hill

18-38

For Big Ten teams when traveling across multiple time zones the last two seasons, since the conference expanded to 18 teams in adding West Coast members Oregon, UCLA, USC and Washington. Michigan is 0-2, with losses at Washington in 2024 and USC in 2025. This season, the Wolverines will travel to Oregon Nov. 14 and host UCLA Nov. 21.

"I think they can win the conference. It's not a group with a lot of household names, but there's a lot of depth with really good players."

— An anonymous Big Ten coach on Michigan to Athlon Sports

18 Incoming scholarship transfers for Michigan football in 2026, topping last season's total of 17 for the most in program history. The Wolverines added linebacker Max Alford (BYU), defensive back Chris Bracy (Memphis), punter Cam Brown (UNLV), wide receiver JJ Buchanan (Utah), kicker Trey Butkowski (Pittsburgh), long snapper Nico Crawford (Pittsburgh), defensive end John Henry Daley (Utah), wide receiver Jaime Ffrench (Texas), quarterback Brayden Fowler-Nicolosi (Colorado State), offensive lineman Houston Ka'aha'aina-Torres (Nebraska), defensive tackle Jonah Lea'ea (Utah), long snapper Gavin Magorien (Marshall), linebacker Aisea Moa (Michigan State), wide receiver Salesi Moa (Utah), linebacker Christian Pierce (Western Illinois), defensive back Smith Snowden (Utah), linebacker Nathaniel Staehling (North Dakota State) and defensive back Taylor Tatum (Oklahoma).

"I'd have been pissed off at myself down the road had I not taken the job. Didn't need to see it. Knew what it was, knew the challenge, wanted the challenge. The expectations here are high, and they should be. But I adapt to change well, so here we go. New chapter."

— Head coach Kyle Whittingham to USA Today

20 Made field goals for sophomore kicker Trey Butkowski at Pittsburgh last season, ranking tied for 23rd in the FBS and fourth in the Atlantic Coast Conference. He earned second-team All-ACC recognition.

"The standard here is a national championship. You go outside and you see The Big House — [2023 national champions] — and it's all very exciting. The fan base has expectations, and you want to be able to rise up to the occasion. That's definitely part of it."

— Senior defensive end John Henry Daley

7th

On Sporting News' ranking of the quarterback situations in the Big Ten in 2026, with Oregon, Ohio State, USC, Indiana, Washington and Penn State standing ahead of Michigan.

2,820

Yards of total offense for sophomore quarterback **BRYCE UNDERWOOD** in 2025, ranking ninth in the Big Ten. Underwood tallied 2,428 passing and 392 rushing.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

16 Five-star recruits have enrolled at Michigan since 2004, according to the Rivals Industry ranking, including running back **SAVION HITER** in 2026. He joins quarterback Bryce Underwood (2025), offensive lineman Andrew Babalola (2025), defensive back Will Johnson (2022), defensive back Daxton Hill (2019), defensive tackle Christopher Hinton (2019), wide receiver Donovan Peoples-Jones (2017), defensive tackle Aubrey Solomon (2017), defensive lineman Rashan Gary (2016), defensive back Jabrill Peppers (2014), cornerback Donovan Warren (2007), defensive end Brandon Graham (2006), running back Kevin Grady (2005), defensive lineman Marques Slocum (2005), quarterback Chad Henne (2004) and defensive end Tim Jamison (2004).

19th In the country in scoring defense for BYU in 2025, allowing 19.1 points per game under Michigan defensive coordinator Jay Hill, who spent three seasons in Provo.

33

Missed tackles forced by junior running back Jordan Marshall in 2025. That ranked ninth in the Big Ten, but he recorded fewer rushing attempts than all but one of the players ahead of him.

"It's really fun to cheer them on, but in the back of your mind, it inspires us to want this school to come together for the football team how they do for the basketball team going to the national championship. We want to go and get a national championship for the school."

— Junior offensive lineman Andrew Sprague on the men's basketball team's success

7:30 p.m. ET

Kickoff for a third straight season-opener, with Michigan set to host Western Michigan in prime time on NBC Sept. 5.

"Kyle Whittingham didn't want to leave Utah, but he probably can't feel too bad about where he ended up. Whit has long been either in our top 10 or just on the periphery of it, so this spot is not a result of him being at a blue-blood program. However, like Matt Campbell at Penn State, I wonder how he'll be judged going forward, given the very different expectations at his new job than at his last gig."

— CBS Sports writer Tom Fornelli, ranking Kyle Whittingham as the 10th-best Power Four head coach

6,938

Career passing yards and 1,949 offensive snaps in 31 games with 28 starts for graduate quarterback Brayden Fowler-Nicolosi, who played for Colorado State the last four seasons. For his career, he's completed 60.2 percent of his passes with 38 touchdowns and 29 interceptions.

"If you've got your top 10 percent of your team that works their butt off and trains hard, everyone else seems to follow suit. Set the bar, demand everyone else live up to it."

*— Head coach **KYLE WHITTINGHAM***

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

The Wolverine's Projected 2026 Depth Chart

OFFENSE

Pos.	No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
QB	19	Bryce Underwood	6-4	228	So./3
	14	Tommy Carr	6-4	185	Fr./4
RB	23	Jordan Marshall	5-11	216	Jr./3
	5	Savion Hiter	6-0	210	Fr./4
WR	3	Andrew Marsh	6-0	190	So./3
	10	Jaime Ffrench	6-1	185	So./4
WR	13	JJ Buchanan	6-3	225	So./3
	0	Kendrick Bell	6-2	205	Sr./2
WR	12	Salesi Moa	6-2	175	Fr./4
	86	Travis Johnson	6-2	185	Fr./4
TE	80	Hogan Hansen	6-5	240	Jr./3
	83	Zack Marshall	6-4	245	Sr./2
or	88	Deakon Tonielli	6-5	246	Sr./2
FB	42	Jalen Hoffman	6-3	245	Sr./2
	44	Eli Owens	6-1	244	So./4
LT	77	Blake Frazier	6-6	295	Jr./3
	65	Andrew Babalola	6-6	315	So./4
LG	71	Evan Link	6-6	324	Sr./2
	55	Nathan Efobi	6-3	312	Sr./2
C	53	Jake Guarnera	6-4	311	Jr./3
	67	Houston Ka'aha'aina-Torres	6-3	300	So./4
RG	70	Brady Norton	6-4	312	Sr./2
	74	Avery Gach	6-5	308	So./4
RT	54	Andrew Sprague	6-8	315	Jr./3
	65	Andrew Babalola	6-6	315	So./4

DEFENSE

Pos.	No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
DE	90	John Henry Daley	6-4	255	Sr./2
	8	Dominic Nichols	6-5	255	Jr./3
DE	9	Cameron Brandt	6-4	270	Sr./1
	88	Lugard Edokpayi	6-7	250	Jr./3
DT	95	Trey Pierce	6-2	310	Sr./1
	91	Jonah Lea'ea	6-5	285	Sr./2
DT	17	Enow Etta	6-5	320	Sr./2
	54	Deyvid Palepale	6-2	335	Jr./3
LB	29	Chase Taylor	6-2	237	So./3
	44	Nathaniel Staehling	6-2	238	Gr./1
LB	18	Troy Bowles	6-0	230	Sr./2
or	12	Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng	6-1	217	So./3
NB	3	Smith Snowden	5-10	185	Sr./1
	10	Zeke Berry	5-11	196	Gr./1
CB	0	Jyaire Hill	6-2	190	Sr./2
	2	Shamari Earls	6-2	205	So./3
CB	10	Zeke Berry	5-11	196	Gr./1
	16	Jo'Ziah Edmond	6-1	185	Jr./3
S	1	Rod Moore	6-0	198	Gr./1
	6	Jordan Young	6-0	195	So./3
S	20	Chris Bracy	6-1	195	Jr./2
	25	Mason Curtis	6-5	211	Jr./2

SPECIAL TEAMS

Pos.	No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
K	99	Trey Butkowski	6-0	170	So./3
	35	Stuart Blake	6-1	181	Jr./3
P	90	Hudson Hollenbeck	6-2	206	Gr./1
or	—	Cam Brown	6-2	185	So./3
LS	49	Nico Crawford	6-2	235	Gr./1
	46	Gavin Magorien	6-0	202	So./3
KR	3	Andrew Marsh	6-0	190	So./3
	3	Smith Snowden	5-10	185	Sr./1
or	12	Salesi Moa	6-2	175	Fr./4
PR	3	Andrew Marsh	6-0	190	So./3
	12	Salesi Moa	6-2	175	Fr./4

STAFF PREDICTIONS

	JOHN BORTON, Senior Writer	CHRIS BALAS, TheWolverine.com Editor	ANTHONY BROOME, Staff Writer
National Champion:	Texas	Georgia	Oregon
CFP Top Four:	Texas, Notre Dame, Ohio State, Oregon	Ohio State, Georgia, Oregon, Miami	Oregon, Texas, Indiana, Notre Dame
Big Ten Championship Game:	Oregon over Ohio State	Ohio State over Oregon	Oregon over Ohio State
Michigan Regular-Season Record:	9-3	9-3	9-3
Does Michigan Make The CFP?:	No	No	No
Most Anticipated U-M Game:	Ohio State	Ohio State	Ohio State
Big Ten Team On The Rise:	Michigan	UCLA	Michigan
Big Ten Team On The Decline:	Michigan State	Michigan State	Illinois
Offensive Breakout Player:	WR JJ Buchanan	WR Andrew Marsh	QB Bryce Underwood
Defensive Breakout Player:	DE John Henry Daley	LB Chase Taylor	DT Trey Pierce
Michigan MVP:	RB Jordan Marshall	RB Jordan Marshall	DE John Henry Daley

	CLAYTON SAYFIE, Staff Writer	DREW HALLETT, Columnist	DOUG SKENE*
National Champion:	Oregon	Oregon	Oregon
CFP Top Four:	Georgia, Notre Dame, Oregon, Texas Tech	Oregon, Notre Dame, Texas, Georgia	Oregon, Notre Dame, Ohio State, Texas
Big Ten Championship Game:	Oregon over Ohio State	Oregon over Ohio State	Oregon over Ohio State
Michigan Regular-Season Record:	8-4	8-4	8-4
Does Michigan Make The CFP?:	No	No	No
Most Anticipated U-M Game:	Ohio State	Ohio State	Oregon
Big Ten Team On The Rise:	Penn State	Penn State	Penn State
Big Ten Team On The Decline:	Iowa	Illinois	Wisconsin
Offensive Breakout Player:	RB Savion Hiter	WR Andrew Marsh	RB Savion Hiter
Defensive Breakout Player:	DT Enow Etta	S Mason Curtis	DB Zeke Berry
Michigan MVP:	RB Jordan Marshall	RB Jordan Marshall	RB Jordan Marshall

** Former U-M All-Big Ten offensive lineman and contributor to TheWolverine.com*

Future Michigan Football Opponents — 2027 Through 2034

The Big Ten Conference in the fall of 2023 announced five years' worth of future football schedules for the 2024-2028 seasons. With the additions of UCLA, Oregon, Southern California (USC) and Washington, 2024 was the first season with 18 teams and no divisional format.

The two teams with the best conference records will meet in the conference championship game in Indianapolis, with this year's game falling on Dec. 5.

Game dates and times for Big Ten Conference games in 2027-28 are still to be determined. Only the home and away locations have been released.

Michigan State and Ohio State are the two annual "protected" rivalry games that will remain on Michigan's schedule each season.

Michigan will have five Big Ten home games (and four away) this season and in 2028, and five conference away games (and four home) in 2027.

From a nonconference perspective, Michigan has a strong lineup of marquee teams scheduled. The Wolverines will host Oklahoma Sept. 12 in the second leg of a home-and-home series. Similarly, Michigan will play at Texas in 2027 after having hosted the Longhorns in 2024. Both Oklahoma and Texas began play in the Southeastern Conference in 2024.

Michigan's Future Football Schedules

2027	
Date	**Opponent**
Sept. 4	BUFFALO
Sept. 11	at Texas
Sept. 18	EASTERN MICHIGAN
TBA	ILLINOIS
TBA	OHIO STATE
TBA	OREGON
TBA	RUTGERS
TBA	at Indiana
TBA	at Iowa
TBA	at Michigan State
TBA	at Penn State
TBA	at UCLA

2028	
Date	**Opponent**
TBA	MARYLAND
TBA	MICHIGAN STATE
TBA	NEBRASKA
TBA	NORTHWESTERN
TBA	USC
TBA	at Ohio State
TBA	at Purdue
TBA	at Washington
TBA	at Wisconsin

Future Nonconference Opponents	
Year	**Opponent**
2029	WESTERN MICHIGAN
2030	EASTERN MICHIGAN
2033	NOTRE DAME
2034	at Notre Dame

Note: Home games denoted in CAPS; Schedules subject to change

Looking well into the future, Michigan's other marquee nonconference opponent is Notre Dame. The Fighting Irish are scheduled for a home-and-home series with Michigan, and the games will be played in Ann Arbor in 2033 and in South Bend in 2034.

Michigan's known nonconference opponents in the future are mostly regional matchups with Mid-American Conference (MAC) schools, including: Western Michigan (2026 and 2029), Buffalo (2027) and Eastern Michigan (2027 and 2030). U-M has not yet announced any nonconference opponents for the 2028 season.

— Mark Panus

Tommy Carr Could Be A Driving Force At No. 2

Tommy Carr's Michigan connections couldn't be more solid. Now he gets to add his piece to the puzzle.

The grandson of former head coach Lloyd Carr, grandson of Michigan All-America safety Tom Curtis, and son of former Michigan QB Jason Carr earned the No. 2 spot on the Wolverines' quarterbacks depth chart this spring. Just as importantly, he earned the new head coach's respect.

"First of all, he's got that 'it factor' for a quarterback, that confidence, that field general mentality, the way he carries himself," Michigan head coach Kyle Whittingham said. "He's a football junkie. I'm in the facility at 10 at night, I walk by the quarterback room, and there's Tommy Carr watching film all by himself in the film room. He is completely just immersed in his development, as far as trying to get better and doing everything he can to perfect his craft. That's really what you want to see in your quarterback.

"He's a leader by nature, and by virtue of position, you better be a leader at the quarterback spot."

Carr himself knows what it means to lead, as a two-year starter at nearby Saline High and via his gargantuan gridiron bloodlines.

"It's just the experience they had," Carr noted of his lineage. "They've been through it all. When they give me advice, I listen, because they know what they're talking about. That's been a big help in this process."

Freshman quarterback Tommy Carr boasts some impressive family ties. He is the paternal grandson of former head coach Lloyd Carr, maternal grandson of Michigan All-America safety Tom Curtis, son of former Michigan QB Jason Carr and brother of current Notre Dame starting quarterback CJ Carr.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

As for his study habits, Carr insisted it's just what the job requires.

"You want to be as prepared as possible, just for the next practice," he said. "You've got to take practice like it's a game and do whatever you can to be the most prepared possible. Whether that's watching film or just doing recovery, that's what you've got to do."

Michigan's roster thinness at quarterback certainly didn't hurt him in getting up to college-game speed, Carr admitted.

"Early on, it was a big change," he said. "Receivers, defenses — everyone's faster. I've been blessed to get a lot of reps this spring, and I just got more comfortable as it went on."

He's looking to get "as strong as possible" this summer, gain weight, and learn the playbook backward and forward. He's also looking to keep the family tradition going inside Schembechler Hall.

"I get to walk into Schem every day and see my grandpas' pictures," said Carr. "There's a picture with the family, and I'm up there with my grandpa, my dad and my other grandpa. It's pretty cool, just to see that every day."

— John Borton

Big Ten Recruiting Rankings Breakdown

"Recruiting is the lifeblood of a college football program." We've all heard it many times, but the cliché has proven to be true.

Talent acquisition is the name of the game, but there are different ways of going about it now that players can transfer an unlimited amount of times without sitting out a year.

General managers and coaches are exhausting all options to build high-level rosters, including through the portal. This season, the Big Ten has just one team without double-digit incoming transfers — USC with nine. Even projected national title contenders Oregon (16), Indiana (17), Ohio State (17) and Michigan (18) have well over a dozen.

Indiana became the outlier of all outliers in winning the Big Ten's third straight national championship last season. CBS Sports writer Bud Elliott has long tracked "blue-chip ratio," the percentage of four- and five-star prospects on a team. Until 2025, every national champion from 2011 on had a blue-chip ratio of 50-plus percent, including Michigan in 2023 (54 percent). However, Indiana was at 8 percent a year ago and largely won because of an abundance of transfers and an incredible coaching staff led by Curt Cignetti.

The backbone of a typical basis, though, is high school recruiting, even if the Hoosiers shattered that theory last fall. It's no surprise that the teams who usually finish near the top of the league also bring in the best classes.

Over the last five seasons, Ohio State (average national class rank of fourth), Oregon (5.8) and Michigan (12) have recruited the best in the conference, according to the Rivals Industry Ranking. USC, though, just inked the No. 1 class in America — one of five Big Ten teams to have their best class in the last five years in the 2026 cycle, a trend worth noting.

Freshman defensive end Carter Meadows is one of two five-star prospects to sign with Michigan in 2026 (Savion Hiter is the other). U-M finished with the No. 11 class nationally, per Rivals.

PHOTO COURTESY RIVALS

The Wolverines pulled in the No. 11 class in the FBS in 2026, finishing fourth in the Big Ten behind USC (No. 1 nationally), Ohio State (3) and Oregon (4). That was the best among programs that made a head-coaching change this offseason, with U-M going from Sherrone Moore to Kyle Whittingham.

Ohio State is still the class of the league on the recruiting trail, even if Indiana is currently on top on the field. The Buckeyes have had top-five classes all but one cycle since 2015, including each of the last five years.

Oregon, meanwhile, has joined as a top-five recruiting power under head coach Dan Lanning, with No. 3, No. 4 and No. 4 finishes in 2024, 2025 and 2026, respectively.

Penn State took a dip because of its No. 64 group in 2026, due in large part to the coaching staff change with Matt Campbell taking over for James Franklin. PSU had a 13.4 average class ranking from 2021-25.

There's a significant drop-off after Ohio State, Oregon, Michigan, USC and Penn State. Iowa (30.8) and Washington (38.4) are next up and worth watching. Both had their best classes in some time coming into this fall, finishing No. 23 and No. 13, respectively.

— Clayton Sayfie

BIG TEN RECRUITING — FIVE-YEAR SNAPSHOT

TEAM	Avg. Class Rank	2026	2025	2024	2023	2022	Best Class (2022-26)
Ohio State	4	3	5	4	4	4	3rd (2026)
Oregon	5.8	4	4	3	7	11	3rd (2024)
Michigan	***12***	***11***	***6***	***16***	***18***	***9***	***6th (2025)***
USC	17.8	1	15	18	9	46	1st (2026)
Penn State	22.6	64	13	15	14	7	7th (2022)
Iowa	30.8	23	33	29	39	30	23rd (2026)
Washington	38.4	13	25	48	27	79	13th (2026)
Wisconsin	39.2	69	27	22	46	32	22nd (2024)
Michigan State	39.2	58	47	43	23	25	23rd (2023)
Maryland	39.8	38	32	44	47	38	32nd (2025)
Nebraska	40	87	21	24	29	39	21st (2025)
Rutgers	41.2	37	29	40	58	42	29th (2025)
Minnesota	42.4	32	51	34	43	52	32nd (2026)
Illinois	42.4	22	45	52	40	53	22nd (2026)
Indiana	46.2	30	53	60	59	29	29th (2022)
UCLA	48.2	65	40	68	31	37	31st (2023)
Purdue	55.8	50	90	30	65	44	30th (2024)
Northwestern	58.2	55	65	73	49	49	49th (2023, '24)

Team	Transfers In
UCLA	42
Penn State	38
Wisconsin	33
Purdue	29
Michigan State	28
Illinois	20
Minnesota	18
Michigan	***18***
Indiana	17
Ohio State	17
Northwestern	17
Rutgers	17
Oregon	16
Nebraska	16
Iowa	15
Maryland	14
Washington	14
USC	9

Illinois, Texas, Ohio Lead The Way On 2026 Roster

A total of 29 states and two foreign countries, Germany and Australia, are represented on the 2026 Michigan roster of scholarship players. Here's a breakdown of states with the most representation and the key players from each.

Illinois (10)

The senior class includes tight end Deakon Tonielli (Oswego), offensive linemen Brooks Bahr (Lake Forest) and Trey Pierce (Chicago) and cornerback Jyaire Hill (Kankakee). Junior defensive back I'Marion Stewart (Chicago) and sophomore defensive end Nate Marshall (Oak Park) and linebacker Christian Pierce (Chicago) fill out the next two classes. Three freshmen enter the program from Illinois in defensive end McHale Blade (Chicago), offensive lineman Tommy Fraumann (Wilmette) and long snapper Jack Treutelaar (Libertyville).

Texas (10)

U-M's contingent from the Lone Star State includes grad transfer quarterback Brayden Fowler-Nicolosi (Aledo) and senior defensive tackle Enow Etta (Keller). Defensive back transfer Taylor Tatum (Longview) joins the fold as a junior, along with offensive tackle Blake Frazier (Austin). Sophomore wide receiver Andrew Marsh (Katy) may be the best of the bunch. The freshman haul from the state includes safety Jordan Deck (Little Elm), defensive end Ndi Etta (Keller), wide receiver Jaylen Pile (Grapevine), defensive tackle Alister Valejo (Liberty Hill) and cornerback Jamarion Vincent (Waco).

Ohio (9)

Grad transfer long snapper Nico Crawford (Dublin), wide receiver C.J. Charleston (Gates Mills) and sixth-year safety Rod Moore (Clayton) lead the way in terms of experience from south of the state line. Junior representation on this year's roster includes running back Jordan Marshall (Cincinnati), offensive linemen Luke Hamilton (Avon) and defensive lineman Ted Hammond (Cincinnati). Quarterback Chase Herbstreit (Cincinnati) is the lone sophomore, while running back Jonathan Brown (Columbus) and linebacker Aden Reeder (Cincinnati) round out the freshman class.

Senior tight end Deakon Tonielli is one of 10 scholarship players from Illinois. He caught 8 passes for 72 yards in 13 games played last season.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

California (8)

Roster representation from California is headlined by graduate defensive back Zeke Berry (Pittsburg). Tight end Zack Marshall (Carlsbad), offensive lineman Brady Norton (Mission Viejo), defensive lineman Cameron Brandt (Chatsworth) and defensive tackle transfer Jonah Lea'ea (San Mateo) represent the seniors on the team, along with long snapper Trent Middleton (Fullerton). Freshmen from California are safety Ernest Nunley (Carson) and quarterback Brady Smigiel (Thousand Oaks).

Michigan (7)

Michigan led with 15 players on last year's roster, many of whom have moved on. Senior running back Bryson Kuzdzal (Ada) and punter Hunter Robertson (Huntington Woods), along with junior safety Jacob Oden (Detroit) are the returning upperclassmen. Starting quarterback Bryce Underwood (Belleville), offensive lineman Avery Gach (Franklin) and defensive lineman Bobby Kanka (Howell) return as sophomores. The state's freshman representation comes via quarterback Tommy Carr (Saline).

Virginia (6)

Offensive lineman Evan Link (Burke) and tight end Jalen Hoffman (Burke) lead the Virginia contingent as seniors this season. Sophomore Shamari Earls (Chester) is back, while three freshmen join, including five-star running back Savion Hiter (Louisa), wide receiver Travis Johnson (Chesapeake) and linebacker Markel Dabney (Chesterfield).

Maryland (6)

Junior defensive ends Dominic Nichols (Frederick) and Lugard Edokpayi (Bowie) lead the way as the most experienced from their home state. The sophomore class includes linebacker Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng (Hyattsville) and defensive back Kainoa Winston (Montgomery Village), and two freshmen join in defensive end Carter Meadows (Bethesda), a five-star recruit, and offensive lineman Ace Hamilton (Clinton).

— Anthony Broome

2026 ALPHABETICAL ROSTER

No.	Name	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.	Hometown/High School/Last School
30	Max Alford	LB	6-1	230	Gr.	Park City, Utah / Park City / BYU
31	Nico Andrighetto	S	5-9	190	Gr.	Mountain View, Calif. / Saint Francis
97	Chibi Anwunah	DT	6-5	300	Gr.	Canton, Mich. / Plymouth Christian Academy
65	Andrew Babalola	OL	6-6	315	So.	Overland Park, Kan. / Blue Valley Northwest
—	Jacob Baggett	K	6-0	170	Fr.	Charlotte, N.C. / Providence Day
60	Brooks Bahr	OL	6-5	312	Sr.	Lake Forest, Ill. / Loyola Academy
38	Sam Baron	CB	6-1	188	Sr.	Cadillac, Mich. / Lake City Area
49	Adam Bazzi	LB	5-11	205	Jr.	Rochester Hills, Mich. / Stoney Creek
76	Manuel Beigel	OL	6-5	312	Jr.	Frankfurt, Germany / Choate Rosemary Hall (Conn.)
0	Kendrick Bell	WR	6-2	205	Sr.	Kansas City, Mo. / Park Hill
10	Zeke Berry	CB	5-11	196	Gr.	Pittsburg, Calif. / De La Salle
51	McHale Blade	DE	6-4	245	Fr.	Country Club Hills, Ill. / Simeon
35	Stuart Blake	K	6-1	181	Jr.	Jenkintown, Pa. / Jenkintown
—	Tariq Boney	DE	6-2	245	Fr.	Washington, D.C. / St. John's College
—	Mason Bonner	TE	6-7	225	Fr.	Lakewood, Colo. / Mullen
18	Troy Bowles	LB	6-0	230	Sr.	Tampa, Fla. / Jesuit / Georgia
20	Chris Bracy	S	6-1	195	Jr.	Mobile, Ala. / St. Paul's Episcopal / Memphis
9	Cameron Brandt	DE	6-4	270	Sr.	Carson, Calif. / Sierra Canyon
81	Jamar Browder	WR	6-5	215	So.	Jacksonville, Fla. / Santaluces Community
—	Cam Brown	P	6-2	185	So.	Queensland, Australia / UNLV
29	Jonathan Brown	RB	6-3	200	Fr.	Westerville, Ohio / St. Francis DeSales
13	JJ Buchanan	WR	6-3	225	So.	Henderson, Nev. / Coronado / Utah
99	Trey Butkowski	K	6-0	170	So.	Orlando, Fla. / Lake Nona / Pitt
14	Tommy Carr	QB	6-4	185	Fr.	Saline, Mich. / Saline
33	Kaden Catchings	LB	6-1	220	Fr.	Jackson, Miss. / Hartfield
82	C.J. Charleston	WR	6-0	190	Gr.	Cleveland, Ohio / Gilmour Academy / Youngstown State
42	Jeffrey Chukwu	CB	6-2	195	Jr.	Severna Park, Md. / Severna Park
49	Nico Crawford	LS	6-2	235	Gr.	Dublin, Ohio / Dublin Scioto / Pitt
25	Mason Curtis	S	6-5	211	Jr.	Nashville, Tenn. / Ensworth
23	Markel Dabney	LB	6-1	225	Fr.	Chesterfield, Va. / Huguenot
90	John Henry Daley	DE	6-4	255	Sr.	Alpine, Utah / Lone Peak / Utah
—	Titan Davis	DT	6-4	275	Fr.	Overland, Mo. / De Smet Jesuit
22	Jordan Deck	S	6-2	190	Fr.	Little Elm, Texas / Lone Star
72	Peter Donini	OL	6-9	270	So.	Summit, N.J. / Delbarton
2	Shamari Earls	CB	6-2	205	So.	Richmond, Va. / Thomas Dale
16	Jo'Ziah Edmond	CB	6-1	185	Jr.	Indianapolis, Ind. / NorthWood
88	Lugard Edokpayi	DE	6-7	250	Jr.	Bowie, Md. / Bishop McNamara
55	Nathan Efobi	OL	6-3	312	Sr.	Atlanta, Ga. / South Forsyth
17	Enow Etta	DT	6-5	320	Sr.	Keller, Texas / Covenant Christian Academy
—	Ndi Etta	DE	6-2	215	Fr.	Keller, Texas / Liberty Christian
10	Jaime Ffrench	WR	6-1	185	So.	Jacksonville, Fla. / Mandarin / Texas
—	Tommy Fraumann	OL	6-8	265	Fr.	Wilmette, Ill. / Loyola
85	Logan Forbes	WR	6-2	195	Gr.	Clarkston, Mich. / Clarkston
—	Brayden Fowler-Nicolosi	QB	6-2	200	Gr.	Aledo, Texas / Aledo / Colorado State
77	Blake Frazier	OL	6-6	295	Jr.	Austin, Texas / Vandegrift
74	Avery Gach	OL	6-5	308	So.	Franklin, Mich. / Groves
9	Channing Goodwin	WR	6-1	197	Jr.	Charlotte, N.C. / Providence Day
53	Jake Guarnera	OL	6-4	311	Jr.	Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla. / Ponte Vedra
52	Ace Hamilton	OL	6-3	295	Fr.	Clinton, Md. / St. John's College
50	Luke Hamilton	OL	6-5	319	Jr.	Avon, Ohio / Avon
92	Ted Hammond	DT	6-5	294	Jr.	Cincinnati, Ohio / St. Xavier
80	Hogan Hansen	TE	6-5	240	Jr.	Bellevue, Wash. / Bellevue
15	Chase Herbstreit	QB	6-1	198	So.	Cincinnati, Ohio / St. Xavier
0	Jyaire Hill	CB	6-2	190	Sr.	Kankakee, Ill. / Kankakee
5	Savion Hiter	RB	6-0	210	Fr.	Louisa, Va. / Louisa County
42	Jalen Hoffman	TE	6-3	245	Sr.	Burke, Va. / Lake Braddock
90	Hudson Hollenbeck	P	6-2	206	Gr.	Collierville, Tenn. / Collierville / Mississippi State
37	Julius Holly	DE	6-4	230	So.	Alpharetta, Ga. / Alpharetta
26	Donovan Johnson	RB	6-0	215	So.	Savannah, Ga. / IMG Academy (Fla.)
86	Travis Johnson	WR	6-2	185	Fr.	Chesapeake, Va. / Oscar Smith

2026 NUMERICAL ROSTER

No.	Name	Pos.
0	Kendrick Bell	WR
0	Jyaire Hill	CB
1	Rod Moore	S
2	Shamari Earls	CB
3	Andrew Marsh	WR
3	Smith Snowden	CB
5	Jacob Oden	S
5	Savion Hiter	RB
6	Jordan Young	S
8	Dominic Nichols	DE
9	Channing Goodwin	WR
9	Cameron Brandt	DE
10	Zeke Berry	CB
10	Jaime Ffrench	WR
12	Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng	LB
12	Salesi Moa	WR
13	JJ Buchanan	WR
13	Aisea Moa	LB
14	Tommy Carr	QB
15	Chase Herbstreit	QB
15	Aden Reeder	LB
16	Jo'Ziah Edmond	CB
17	Enow Etta	DT
17	Brady Smigiel	QB
18	Troy Bowles	LB
19	Bryce Underwood	QB
20	Jaylen Pile	WR
20	Chris Bracy	S
22	Jordan Deck	S
23	Jordan Marshall	RB
23	Markel Dabney	LB
24	Bryson Kuzdzal	RB
24	Jamarion Vincent	CB
25	Mason Curtis	S
25	Micah Ka'apana	RB
26	Donovan Johnson	RB
26	Taylor Tatum	S
27	Ernest Nunley	S
28	I'Marion Stewart	CB
28	Kainoa Winston	S
29	Chase Taylor	LB
29	Jonathan Brown	RB
30	Max Alford	LB
31	Nico Andrighetto	S
32	Jeremiah Lowe	CB
32	Gary Stacy	RB
33	Kaden Catchings	LB
35	Stuart Blake	K
36	Joshua Nichols	CB
36	Tomas O'Meara	RB
37	Julius Holly	DE
38	Bryce Wilcox	WR
38	Sam Baron	CB
39	Max Reyes	S
42	Jeffrey Chukwu	CB
42	Jalen Hoffman	TE
43	Zach Ludwig	LB
44	Eli Owens	TE
44	Nathaniel Staehling	LB
46	Crandall Quinn	TE
46	Gavin Magorien	LS

2026 NUMERICAL ROSTER

No.	Name	Pos.
49	Adam Bazzi	LB
49	Nico Crawford	LS
50	Luke Hamilton	OL
51	McHale Blade	DE
52	Ace Hamilton	OL
52	Christian Pierce	LB
53	Jake Guarnera	OL
54	Deyvid Palepale	DT
54	Andrew Sprague	OL
55	Randy Keumogne	DE
55	Nathan Efobi	OL
57	Travis Moten	DT
58	Eli Musmand	DE
59	John Weidenbach	LB
60	Brooks Bahr	OL
64	James Kavouklis	OL
65	Andrew Babalola	OL
66	Dan Taraboi	OL
67	Trent Middleton	LS
67	Houston Ka'aha'aina-Torres	OL
70	Brady Norton	OL
71	Evan Link	OL
72	Peter Donini	OL
74	Avery Gach	OL
76	Manuel Beigel	OL
77	Blake Frazier	OL
78	Marky Walbridge	OL
80	Hogan Hansen	TE
81	Jamar Browder	WR
82	C.J. Charleston	WR
83	Zack Marshall	TE
84	Jacob Washington	WR
85	Logan Forbes	WR
86	Travis Johnson	WR
88	Deakon Tonielli	TE
88	Lugard Edokpayi	DE
89	Kaleb Schlecht	WR
90	Hudson Hollenbeck	P
90	John Henry Daley	DE
91	Jonah Lea'ea	DT
92	Ted Hammond	DT
93	Hunter Robertson	P
93	Benny Patterson III	DE
94	Nate Marshall	DE
95	Trey Pierce	DT
97	Chibi Anwunah	DT
99	Bobby Kanka	DT
99	Trey Butkowski	K
—	Jacob Baggett	K
—	Tariq Boney	DE
—	Mason Bonner	TE
—	Titan Davis	DT
—	Cam Brown	P
—	Ndi Etta	DE
—	Brayden Fowler-Nicolosi	QB
—	Tommy Fraumann	OL
—	Malakai Lee	OL
—	Carter Meadows	DE
—	Jack Treutelaar	LS
—	Alister Vallejo	DL

2026 ALPHABETICAL ROSTER

No.	Name	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.	Hometown/High School/Last School
67	Houston Ka'aha'aina-Torres	OL	6-3	300	So.	Waimanalo, Hawaii / St. Louis / Nebraska
25	Micah Ka'apana	RB	5-11	190	Jr.	Waianae, Hawaii / Bishop Gorman (Nev.)
99	Bobby Kanka	DT	6-4	305	So.	Howell, Mich. / Howell
64	James Kavouklis	OL	6-1	295	Gr.	Tampa, Fla. / Berkeley Prep
55	Randy Keumogne	DE	6-2	237	Gr.	Oakdale, Minn. / Tartan / South Dakota State
24	Bryson Kuzdzal	RB	5-11	210	Sr.	Grand Rapids, Mich. / Forest Hills Eastern
91	Jonah Lea'ea	DT	6-5	285	Sr.	San Mateo, Calif. / Bishop Gorman / Utah
—	Malakai Lee	OL	6-7	350	Fr.	Kaneohe, Hawai'I / Kamehameha Secondary
71	Evan Link	OL	6-6	324	Sr.	Burke, Va. / Gonzaga College
32	Jeremiah Lowe	CB	5-11	180	Jr.	Lexington, Ky. / Frederick Douglass
43	Zach Ludwig	LB	6-2	225	Jr.	South Park, Pa. / South Park
46	Gavin Magorien	LS	6-0	202	So.	Erie, Pa. / McDowell / Marshall
3	Andrew Marsh	WR	6-0	190	So.	Katy, Texas / Katy Jordan
23	Jordan Marshall	RB	5-11	216	Jr.	Cincinnati, Ohio / Archbishop Moeller
94	Nate Marshall	DE	6-3	240	So.	Oak Park, Ill. / Fenwick
83	Zack Marshall	TE	6-4	245	Sr.	Carlsbad, Calif. / Carlsbad
—	Carter Meadows	DE	6-6	235	Fr.	Bethesda, Md. / Gonzaga
67	Trent Middleton	LS	6-2	225	Sr.	Fullerton, Calif. / Orange Lutheran / UCLA
13	Aisea Moa	LB	6-2	238	Gr.	North Ogden, Utah / Weber / Michigan State
12	Salesi Moa	WR	6-2	175	Fr.	Ogden, Utah / Fremont / Utah
1	Rod Moore	S	6-0	198	Gr.	Dayton, Ohio / Northmont
57	Travis Moten	DT	6-6	315	So.	Louisville, Ky. / Fern Creek
58	Eli Musmand	DE	6-3	223	So.	Brooklyn, N.Y. / Poly Prep Country Day
8	Dominic Nichols	DE	6-5	255	Jr.	Frederick, Md. / Oakdale
36	Joshua Nichols	CB	5-10	205	Gr.	Detroit, Mich. / Renaissance
70	Brady Norton	OL	6-4	312	Sr.	Mission Viejo, Calif. / Mission Viejo / Carl Poly
27	Ernest Nunley	S	6-0	180	Fr.	Carson, Calif. / Western
5	Jacob Oden	S	6-1	205	Jr.	Detroit, Mich. / Harper Woods
36	Tomas O'Meara	RB	5-10	192	Jr.	Ann Arbor / Father Gabriel Richard
44	Eli Owens	TE	6-1	244	So.	Alcoa, Tenn. / Alcoa
12	Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng	LB	6-1	217	So.	Hyattsville, Md. / IMG Academy (Fla.)
54	Deyvid Palepale	DT	6-2	335	Jr.	Anchorage, Alaska / Manheim Township (Pa.)
93	Benny Patterson III	DE	6-2	270	So.	Newburgh, Ind. / Castle
52	Christian Pierce	LB	6-0	235	So.	Chicago, Ill. / Brother Rice / Western Illinois
95	Trey Pierce	DT	6-2	310	Sr.	Chicago, Ill. / Brother Rice
20	Jaylen Pile	WR	6-0	195	Fr.	Grapevine, Texas / Parish Episcopal
46	Crandall Quinn	TE	6-2	238	Sr.	Grand Rapids, Mich. / Forest Hills Central
15	Aden Reeder	LB	6-2	215	Fr.	Monroe, Ohio / St. Xavier
39	Max Reyes	S	5-11	203	Gr.	Southlake, Texas / Southlake Carroll
93	Hunter Robertson	P	6-4	205	Sr.	Huntington Woods, Mich. / Berkley / Clarion
89	Kaleb Schlecht	WR	6-4	205	Sr.	Ann Arbor, Mich. / Skyline
17	Brady Smigiel	QB	6-5	215	Fr.	Thousand Oaks, Calif. / Newbury Park
3	Smith Snowden	CB	5-10	185	Sr.	Lehi, Utah / Skyridge / Utah
54	Andrew Sprague	OL	6-8	315	Jr.	Kansas City, Mo. / Rockhurst
32	Gary Stacy	RB	6-1	202	So.	Grosse Pointe Woods, Mich. / Liggett
44	Nathaniel Staehling	LB	6-2	238	Gr.	Baxter, Minn. / Brainerd / North Dakota
28	I'Marion Stewart	CB	5-11	180	Jr.	Chicago, Ill. / Kenwood Academy
66	Dan Taraboi	OL	6-7	328	Gr.	Cedarburg, Wis. / Cedarburg
26	Taylor Tatum	S	5-10	212	Jr.	Longview, Texas / Longview / Oklahoma
29	Chase Taylor	LB	6-2	237	So.	Ellenwood, Ga. / Stockbridge
88	Deakon Tonielli	TE	6-5	246	Sr.	Oswego, Ill. / Oswego
—	Jack Treutelaar	LS	6-1	220	Fr.	Libertyville, Ill. / Libertyville
19	Bryce Underwood	QB	6-4	228	So.	Detroit, Mich. / Belleville
—	Alister Vallejo	DL	6-3	310	Fr.	Liberty Hill, Texas / Liberty Hill
24	Jamarion Vincent	CB	6-2	170	Fr.	Waco, Texas / Waco Connally
78	Marky Walbridge	OL	6-6	285	Fr.	Hanover, Mass. / St. Sebastian's
84	Jacob Washington	WR	6-3	197	So.	Harvey, La. / Archbishop Shaw
59	John Weidenbach	LB	6-0	215	Sr.	Naperville, Ill. / Benet Academy
38	Bryce Wilcox	WR	5-11	191	Gr.	Sharpsburg, Ga. / Trinity Christian
28	Kainoa Winston	S	5-11	204	So.	Montgomery Village, Md. / Gonzaga
6	Jordan Young	S	6-0	195	So.	Monroe, N.C. / Monroe

Michigan Scholarship Roster By Position And Eligibility

POSITION	GRADUATES	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES	FRESHMEN
Quarterback (5)	Brayden Fowler-Nicolosi (1)			Chase Herbstreit (4) Bryce Underwood (3)	Tommy Carr^ (4) Brady Smigiel^ (4)
Tailback (6)		Bryson Kuzdzal* (2)	Micah Ka'apana (3) Jordan Marshall (3)	Donovan Johnson (4)	Jonathan Brown^ (4) Savion Hiter^ (4)
Wide Receiver (11)	C.J. Charleston (1)	Kendrick Bell (2)	Channing Goodwin (3)	JJ Buchanan (3) Jamar Browder (3) Jaime Ffrench (4) Andrew Marsh (3) Jacob Washington (4)	Travis Johnson^ (4) Salesi Moa (4) Jaylen Pile^ (4)
Tight End (6)		Jalen Hoffman* (2) Zack Marshall (2) Deakon Tonielli (2)	Hogan Hansen (3)	Eli Owens (4)	Mason Bonner (4)
Offensive Tackle (7)		Brooks Bahr (2) Brady Norton (2)	Blake Frazier (3) Andrew Sprague (3)	Andrew Babalola (4)	Tommy Fraumann (4) Malakai Lee (4)
Offensive Guard (6)		Nathan Efobi (2) Evan Link (2)	Manuel Beigel (3) Luke Hamilton (3)	Avery Gach (4)	Marky Walbridge^ (4)
Center (3)			Jake Guarnera (3)	H. Ka'aha'aina-Torres (4)	Ace Hamilton^ (4)
Placekicker (2)				Trey Butkowski (3)	Jacob Baggett (4)
Punter (3)	Hudson Hollenbeck (1)	Hunter Robertson (2)		Cam Brown (3)	
Long Snapper (4)	Nico Crawford (1)	Trent Middleton (2)		Gavin Magorien (3)	Jack Treutelaar (4)
Defensive Tackle (9)		Enow Etta (2) Jonah Lea'ea (2) Trey Pierce (1)	Ted Hammond (3) Deyvid Palepale (3)	Bobby Kanka (4) Travis Moten (4)	Titan Davis (4) Alister Vallejo (4)
Defensive End (11)		Cameron Brandt (1) John Henry Daley (2)	Lugard Edokpayi (3) Dominic Nichols (3)	Julius Holly (4) Nate Marshall (3) Benny Patterson III (4)	McHale Blade^ (4) Tariq Boney (4) Ndi Etta (4) Carter Meadows (4)
Linebacker (11)	Max Alford (1) Aisea Moa (1) Nathaniel Staehling (1)	Troy Bowles (2)	Zach Ludwig (3)	N. Owusu-Boateng (3) Christian Pierce (4) Chase Taylor (3)	Kaden Catchings^ (4) Markel Dabney^ (4) Aden Reeder^ (4)
Cornerback (8)	Zeke Berry (1)	Jyaire Hill (2) Smith Snowden (1)	Jo'Ziah Edmond (3) Jeremiah Lowe (3) I'Marion Stewart (3)	Shamari Earls (3)	Jamarion Vincent^ (4)
Safety (9)	Rod Moore (1)		Chris Bracy (2) Mason Curtis (2) Jacob Oden (3) Taylor Tatum (3)	Kainoa Winston (4) Jordan Young (3)	Jordan Deck^ (4) Ernest Nunley (4)

Notes:

** Former walk-on now on scholarship (it should also be noted, however, that walk-on scholarships are given on a semester-to-semester basis, and aren't necessarily held onto throughout an entire career).*

^ Freshmen who enrolled at Michigan in January and participated in spring practices.

• Our unofficial count, done in mid-June, has Michigan with 101 players on scholarship. The FBS limit is now 105.

Transitional Year

New Coaching Staff Plus A Mix Of Talent Have Michigan Primed To Compete In Big Ten And Nationally

BY MARK PANUS

The early returns are in, and the three major college football preseason magazines have Michigan slotted to finish fourth or fifth in the Big Ten and anywhere from 13th to 16th nationally. Most programs would be thrilled to be in that position, but this is Michigan. The Wolverines — and first-year head coach Kyle Whittingham — have greater expectations. Job 1 is to compete for the Big Ten title and from there, a berth in the College Football Playoff.

Athlon Sports

Athlon predicts Michigan will finish fourth in the Big Ten and No. 13 nationally, which would have the Wolverines sitting just outside the 12-team College Football Playoff field if the season ends that way. In a redux from a year ago, the publication projects U-M's postseason fate as a Cheez-It Citrus Bowl matchup, this time against Ole Miss.

"New head coach Kyle Whittingham inherits a team poised to contend for the playoff," Athlon wrote. "The Wolverines will be strong once again on defense, but the development of dynamic sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood looms large against a schedule that includes matchups against [No. 8] Oklahoma, [No. 5] Indiana, [No. 6] Oregon and [No. 1] Ohio State. Jordan Marshall and true freshman Savion Hiter form one of the top backfield tandems in the nation."

Other key takeaways from Athlon include:

Offense: "Michigan's 68th-ranked scoring offense gets a boost from a new face running the show [offensive coordinator Jason Beck] and plenty of returning production. … Look for the Wolverines to run more spread and to use Underwood more frequently in the run game. … With four starters back and more depth than last year, Michigan's offensive line is primed to make a jump as well."

Defense: "Jay Hill from BYU takes over as defensive coordinator and wants to replicate the 2023 Michigan national title unit. That means varied looks, simulated blitzes, a mix of zone and man-coverage — all in the name of confusing opponents and forcing turnovers. … If the secondary can stay healthy, Michigan's defense has the ability to become a top unit in college football."

Specialists: "Veteran assistant Kerry Coombs takes over a special teams unit that struggled with fundamentals in 2025 and used the transfer portal to restock. Cameron Brown from UNLV is the favorite to win the punting job, while Pitt's Trey Butkowski was 20-of-23 on field goal attempts as a freshman."

Final Analysis: "The cupboard is far from bare for Whittingham, who makes the jump to Michigan after more than 30 years at Utah, the final 21 as head coach. … Concerns with depth and a difficult schedule could make for some growing pains. A 9-3 season might be the ceiling for this team."

Lindy's Sports

Lindy's Sports, now in its 45th year of publishing a preseason preview, has Mich-

igan slotted slightly below where Athlon has the team. Lindy's projects U-M to finish fifth in the Big Ten and 16th nationally.

The publication ranked Kyle Whittingham at No. 6 nationally (an 8.5 grade out of 10, "outstanding hire") on the list of coaching changes, stating that "Coach Whit is the perfect old-school mentor to establish normalcy following the mess of a situation in Ann Arbor and ... a grand-slam for the Wolverines. ... The question remains whether a guy with no ties to Ann Arbor can keep the wins and talent train rolling."

Under the category of "Most Pivotal Coordinator Moves," Michigan OC Jason Beck was listed No. 1, joining Michigan from Utah, and DC Jay Hill (from BYU) was No. 7. "First-year Wolverines coach Kyle Whittingham went big-game hunting for his two coordinators, bringing his offensive ace-in-the-hole from Salt Lake. Beck's strong run-first approach fits Whittingham and Michigan well. Hill transformed one of the nation's worst defenses into a top-15 unit with the Cougars and ... joins the staff of his former coach at Utah, Whittingham, for the second time in his career."

Wolverines On All-Big Ten Teams

	Athlon*	Lindy's	Phil Steele
RB Jordan Marshall	1st	1st	2nd
DL John Henry Daley	1st	1st	1st
CB Jyaire Hill	1st	1st	1st
OL Andrew Sprague	—	1st	—
OL Blake Frazier	—	3rd	—
AP Andrew Marsh	—	3rd	2nd
DB Chris Bracy	—	3rd	—
DB Zeke Berry	—	—	3rd
DL Enow Etta	—	—	3rd
OL Jake Guarnera	—	—	4th
DB Smith Snowden	—	—	4th

** Athlon only published first-team picks in magazine*

Lindy's led its 2026 outlook for Michigan with the question, "Whittingham brings stability, will wins follow?" The annual magazine went on to describe quarterback Bryce Underwood's inconsistent showing during spring practice as "springtime panic ... but Whittingham wasn't among those overly concerned."

Good news: "The immediate credibility and stability Whittingham brought upon moving from Utah went a long way toward settling the thoroughly unsettled program following the December ouster of Sherrone Moore. No new Power 4 coach landed better coordinators than Whittingham with Beck and Hill."

Bad news: "Sophomore Andrew Marsh is Michigan's only receiver with at least 30 career catches. That's how green the Wolverines are on the outside overall. Much is expected of transfer starters Jaime Ffrench (Texas) and JJ Buchanan (Utah).

Our Call: "Michigan is one of five Big Ten teams capable of getting to the playoffs this season. The Wolverines' strength will be their athleticism near the line of scrimmage, including star Utah transfer John Henry Daley, who registered 11.5 sacks last season."

My, how the times have changed. Lindy's picked its top 15 conference games and "The Game" — Michigan vs. Ohio State — ranked only seventh on the list. Two other Big Ten matchups slotted higher this year: No. 1, Oregon at Ohio State and No. 2, Ohio State at Indiana. However, Michigan's rematch with Oklahoma ranked No. 3 among Lindy's top 15 nonconference games.

The Wolverines' 2026 slate was ranked No. 14 among the 20 Toughest Schedules. "Kyle Whittingham's first barometer game is Oklahoma on Sept. 12 before Big Ten contests against Iowa, Penn State, Indiana, Oregon (road) and Ohio State (road). Didn't see this in Salt Lake City."

Lindy's tabbed U-M running back Savion Hiter No. 6 on its list of Ten Impact Freshmen: "He'll pound after contact and form a relentless 1-2 ground punch with Jordan Marshall. New coach Kyle Whittingham loves that stuff."

The publication also reported that "the run game should still be Michigan's strength, with Whittingham hinting (teasing?) that they might find ways to get the veteran Marshall (932 yards, 10 TDs) and five-star freshman Hiter on the field at the same time."

Daley is Lindy's pick for Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year and U-M's Top Newcomer, while Underwood was projected as U-M's Most Valuable Player and also credited with having the strongest arm in the conference. Sophomore wide receiver Andrew Marsh was listed as the Wolverines' emerging star.

The publication's overview of the U-M program for 2026 sticks to conventional wisdom: "Michigan's primary focus is to continue to develop Underwood while

Top 25 Preseason National Rankings

ATHLON SPORTS	LINDY'S	PHIL STEELE'S 2026 COLLEGE FOOTBALL
1. Ohio State	1. Oregon	1. Notre Dame
2. Georgia	2. Texas	2. Georgia
3. Texas	3. Ohio State	3. Ohio State
4. Notre Dame	4. Notre Dame	4. Texas
5. Indiana	5. Indiana	5. Indiana
6. Oregon	6. Georgia	6. Oregon
7. Miami (Fla.)	7. Miami (Fla.)	7. Miami (Fla.)
8. Oklahoma	8. LSU	8. Alabama
9. Texas A&M	9. Ole Miss	9. Texas Tech
10. LSU	10. USC	10. BYU
11. Ole Miss	11. Alabama	11. USC
12. Texas Tech	12. Texas A&M	12. SMU
13. Michigan	13. Oklahoma	13. Oklahoma
14. USC	14. Texas Tech	14. Ole Miss
15. Alabama	15. BYU	***15. Michigan***
16. BYU	***16. Michigan***	16. Texas A&M
17. Washington	17. Houston	17. Clemson
18. Penn State	18. Louisville	18. Louisville
19. Houston	19. Washington	19. Penn State
20. Utah	20. SMU	20. Navy
21. Tennessee	21. Iowa	21. Tennessee
22. SMU	22. Utah	22. LSU
23. Louisville	23. Penn State	23. Boise State
24. Boise State	24. Clemson	24. Utah
25. Iowa	25. Florida State	25. Washington

Preseason Magazines Predict The Big Ten

ATHLON SPORTS	LINDY'S
1. Ohio State	1. Oregon
2. Indiana	2. Ohio State
3. Oregon	3. Indiana
4. Michigan	4. USC
5. USC	***5. Michigan***
6. Washington	6. Washington
7. Penn State	7. Iowa
8. Iowa	8. Penn State
9. Illinois	9. Illinois
10. Nebraska	10. Minnesota
11. Minnesota	11. Nebraska
12. UCLA	12. Northwestern
13. Wisconsin	13. Wisconsin
14. Northwestern	14. UCLA
15. Maryland	15. Michigan State
16. Rutgers	16. Maryland
17. Michigan State	17. Purdue
18. Purdue	18. Rutgers

PHIL STEELE
T1. Ohio State
Indiana
Oregon
4. USC
T5. Michigan
Penn State
T7. Washington
Iowa
T9. Nebraska
Minnesota
Illinois
T12. Wisconsin
Northwestern
UCLA
15. Maryland
16. Rutgers
17. Michigan State
18. Purdue

controlling the game with the rushing attack. Despite many new faces, the defense is expected to again to be the Wolverines' strength."

Lindy's projects that Michigan will face six ranked teams in 2026, and that its season hinges on three big questions: 1) How quickly will Underwood develop? 2) Will the staff be able to do more with more? 3) Will Jason Beck continue his offensive magic?

Phil Steele's 2026 College Football

Phil Steele, the most accurate forecaster among college football analysts over the past 14 years, pegs Michigan to finish in a tie for fifth place in the Big Ten this season along with Penn State. He graded U-M as the 14th-strongest team in the country in his power poll but picked the Wolverines to finish No. 15 in the rankings. Although that's below the 12-team cut line for the College Football Playoff, Steele called Michigan "a legitimate Big Ten and Playoff contender."

Steele labeled head coach Kyle Whittingham as "the perfect hire" for Michigan since "he believes in being strong at the line of scrimmage on both sides of the ball and having a top-notch D, and that is the Michigan Way." The veteran prognosticator ranked Michigan's 2026 schedule as the second-hardest in the nation, behind only Texas. Steele noted that U-M will face the top three of the Big Ten (Ohio State, Indiana and Oregon) plus Oklahoma, while also ranking the Big Ten and Southeastern Conference in a tie for the toughest conference in the land.

Steele's computer analytics calls for the Wolverines to average 32.2 points per game, which would be an improvement from last year's 27.5-point scoring average. "This year they have a veteran OL and RB, their top WR and QB Underwood now has experience," he explained. ❑

Michigan In National Unit Rankings

ATHLON	PHIL STEELE
OL — 7th	DL — 7th
DL — 9th	OL — 11th
RB — 10th	RB — 13th
DB — 10th	DB — 17th
	QB — 29th
LINDY'S	REC* — 33rd
DL — 6th	ST — 37th
OL — 8th	LB — NR
DB — 9th	** Receivers unit includes tight ends*

Michigan's Preseason All-Americans

DL John Henry Daley — first-team (Athlon), second team (Lindy's), third team (Phil Steele)

DB Jyaire Hill — second-team (Lindy's)

Preseason All-Big Ten Selections By School

ATHLON

School	1st Team	2nd Team	3rd Team	Total
Indiana	7	*	*	7
Oregon	7	*	*	7
Ohio State	4	*	*	4
Michigan	***3***	*****	*****	***3***
Iowa	2	*	*	2
Maryland	2	*	*	2
Rutgers	2	*	*	2
Minnesota	1	*	*	1
Nebraska	1	*	*	1
USC	—	*	*	—
Washington	—	*	*	—
Penn State	—	*	*	—
Illinois	—	*	*	—
UCLA	—	*	*	—
Wisconsin	—	*	*	—
Northwestern	—	*	*	—
Michigan State	—	*	*	—
Purdue	—	*	*	—

** Athlon only published first-team picks in magazine*

LINDY'S

School	1st Team	2nd Team	3rd Team	Total
Oregon	6	4	3	13
Indiana	5	5	2	12
Ohio State	1	6	5	12
Michigan	***4***	***—***	***3***	***7***
Iowa	3	1	1	5
Minnesota	1	2	2	5
USC	—	2	3	5
Penn State	1	2	1	4
UCLA	1	—	1	2
Northwestern	1	—	1	2
Maryland	1	—	1	2
Rutgers	1	1	—	2
Nebraska	—	1	1	2
Washington	—	1	—	1
Illinois	—	—	1	1
Michigan State	—	—	—	—
Purdue	—	—	—	—
Wisconsin	—	—	—	—

PHIL STEELE

School	1st Team	2nd Team	3rd Team	4th Team	Total
Ohio State	5	4	5	1	15
Oregon	5	5	3	2	15
Indiana	7	—	3	3	13
Michigan	***2***	***2***	***2***	***2***	***8***
Minnesota	2	1	2	3	8
Northwestern	1	1	4	2	8
Michigan State	1	5	—	—	6
USC	—	1	2	3	6
Iowa	1	2	1	1	5
Penn State	1	1	2	1	5
Washington	—	—	2	2	4
Maryland	2	1	—	1	4
Rutgers	1	1	1	1	4
Wisconsin	—	1	—	3	4
Nebraska	1	—	—	2	3
Illinois	—	—	2	—	2
UCLA	—	—	—	2	2
Purdue	—	1	—	—	1

Right Man, Right Time

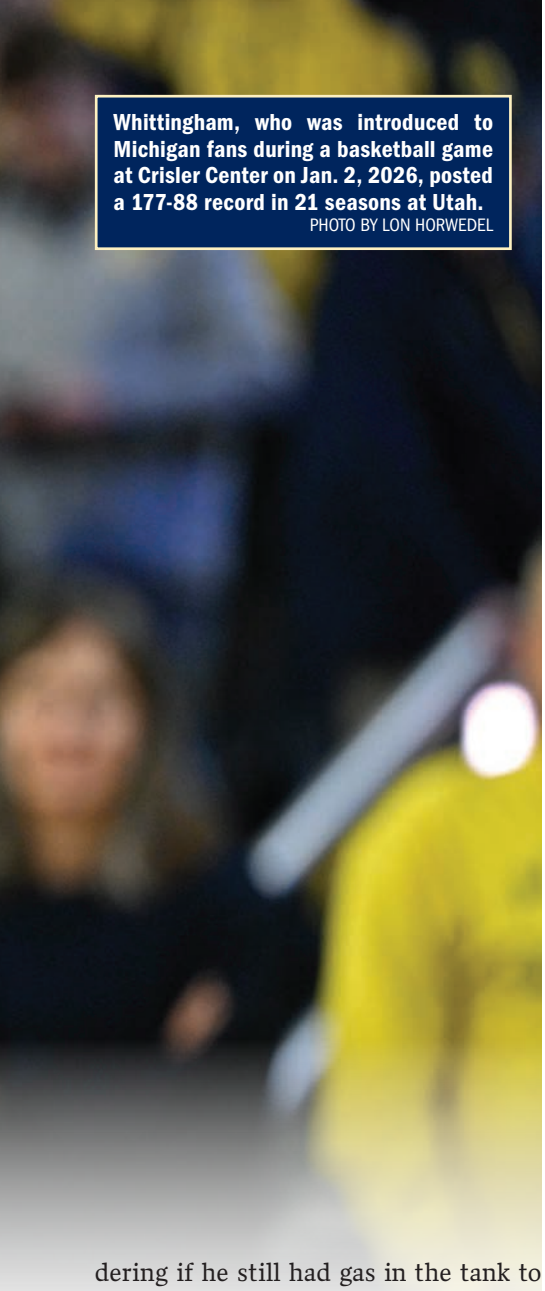
Kyle Whittingham Comes To Michigan With Something To Prove

BY CHRIS BALAS

In his 21 years as Utah's football coach, Kyle Whittingham earned the respect of everybody in the game with whom he crossed paths. His former players, assistant coaches, even opponents had nothing but good things to say about his competitiveness, his teams' physicality, and — most importantly — his integrity.

Yet, when Michigan was looking for a new coach to replace Sherrone Moore, who was fired with cause Dec. 10 following an inappropriate relationship with a staff member, Whittingham wasn't high on many Wolverines fans' wish lists. It wasn't for his lack of success or anything to do with his coaching acumen, mind you. He still appeared on most writers' lists as a top-10 coach in the game after leading the Utes to a 10-2 regular season a year ago.

No, it was his age that had many won-



Whittingham, who was introduced to Michigan fans during a basketball game at Crisler Center on Jan. 2, 2026, posted a 177-88 record in 21 seasons at Utah.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

dering if he still had gas in the tank to get one of the nation's most esteemed programs back to its rightful place as an NCAA superpower. At 66 years old, Whittingham had been flirting with retirement for a few years, knowing he'd be replaced by coach-in-waiting and longtime Utes defensive coordinator Morgan Scalley.

As would later be revealed, though, there was much (much) more to the story. He might not have been "pushed out" at Utah, but there was certainly a nudge from outside forces. And almost everyone agreed after the fact that Michigan "failed up" during its coaching search, including an anonymous Big 12 coach who admitted breathing a sigh of relief that he no longer had to face Whittingham's teams.

"It's definitely a relief that Whittingham is out of the Big 12 because he's a great football coach, and he's an even better person," an anonymous Big 12 coach told Athlon Sports for its annual football preview.

"They cause a lot of mismatches because they're plus-one in the run game with the quarterback and all the pullers and gap schemes that they did," another coach added.

They've got a quarterback to do just that in sophomore Bryce Underwood, and oh … Whittingham also brought his offensive coordinator and the architect of that offense, Jason Beck, to Ann Arbor with him. He also brings a chip on his shoulder that should serve notice to the rest of the Big Ten:

He's here to win, and to win big.

Utah's Loss, Michigan's Gain

But if Whittingham to Michigan wasn't on your bingo card, as they say, you're not alone. While he contemplated his future in the offseason, eventually determining he'd coach one more year before a likely retirement, he always left the door open. He referred to himself as a "free agent" after it got a bit contentious with the school he led to great success over a 21-year career, and it was clear it wasn't going to be the happy send-off many had hoped to see.

With Scalley already named the coach in waiting in 2024, a faction seemed ready to progress with a new era. Instead, on Dec. 2, Whittingham decided he wanted one more season, reportedly asking for a $1.4 million raise, an additional $2 million for his staff, and $20 million in NIL funds to build the 2026 roster.

Utah's counter — $8 million, and the understanding that Scalley and not Whittingham would "assume oversight in matters involving football recruiting/player personnel staffing and the general manager position." The athletics director also insisted Scalley have "complete decision-making authority" over football recruiting, roster and staffing matters.

That had to be a kick in the teeth for a future Hall of Famer like Whittingham, even if he wouldn't admit it publicly. So, when the Michigan job suddenly opened and both sides showed interest only a week later, what once seemed like a clickbait topic became possible, and then even probable.

"Coaching takes some crazy paths that we don't really expect," Whittingham said in one interview, perhaps the understatement of the offseason.

It included taking a lot of the Utah staff with him, along with some outstanding players in All-America defensive end John Henry Daley, All-Big 12 cornerback Smith Snowden and incoming freshman receiver Salesi Moa. A strongly worded letter from the Utah administration followed when they sent him one of his exit payments, but as the Corleone family understood, "it wasn't personal — only business." And there was a reason they all wanted to follow their leader.

"We'll put our own stamp on the program and our own way of doing things. But I'm very respectful and very aware of all the tradition and history at Michigan. I don't have the right, nor should I have the right, to alter that or change that."

WHITTINGHAM

"There's the belief factor," new defensive coordinator Jay Hill told us, adding it took the combination of Whittingham and Michigan to pry him away from BYU. "If you sit down and talk football with Coach Whitt, he's the best X's and O's person I've ever been around. He understands the game well, on both sides. Offense, defense, special teams — he knows the game, inside and out.

"That's why a lot of these assistant coaches are willing to come with him. It's because of trust and faith of who he is as a person, and his knowledge of the game."

The chance to win a national championship doesn't hurt, either, and Whittingham has made it clear the playoff is the goal at Michigan. No less than former Ohio State coach Urban Meyer, his former boss at Utah, insists it's a real possibility, and he's not alone. Several in the national media called this a "win" for U-M, especially with the transition going so smoothly after the Moore debacle.

Whittingham is the winningest football

coach in Utah history, after all, with 177 career victories. He notched eight 10-win seasons, captured three conference championships, and led the Utes to a pair of top-five finishes in the AP poll, including an undefeated season in 2008 in which they might well have been the best team in the country.

Each time Michigan had an opening, from Lloyd Carr's retirement to Rich Rodriguez's firing and beyond, Whittingham always appeared on our "hot boards." It was more wishful thinking than possibility, probably, but ... dare to dream, right? It just seemed like a fit. And while many were skeptical this time given the coach's age, he proved from Day 1 — when he interviewed every player on the team, to everything he's done since — that we were right, even before he's coached a game.

In short, and as Hill told us in an interview, he seems to be exactly what Michigan needs right now. He's a humble but incredibly competitive man who "gets" what it means to be the Michigan coach.

"The tradition, the history here is incredible," Whittingham said. "It's as steeped as any program in the country, maybe the most in that aspect. And Michigan football, before I got here and after I leave, is Michigan football. I'm really in more of a custodial role here, just making sure I'm not here to change any of that tradition or history.

"We'll put our own stamp on the program and our own way of doing things. But I'm very respectful and very aware of all the tradition and history at Michigan. I don't have the right, nor should I have the right, to alter that or change that."

'Coach Of All Coaches'

"Getting Michigan" is part of what it takes to be successful at U-M, as we've seen over the years with both football and basketball coaches, and it's clear Whittingham has that part down. That's sometimes misconstrued to mean "a Michigan man has to coach Michigan," or that a candidate has to know all the traditions, etc., to be qualified. Guys like John Beilein and Dusty May on the hoops side, and Bo Schembechler in football shot that down long ago, coming from outside the program to do it the Michigan way. The "right" coach for U-M, historically, is someone committed to operating with integrity, making sure the players are doing what they're supposed to do in the classroom and off the field, and — of course — winning. Defensive line coach Lou Esposito was only with Whittingham for a few months before moving on to the Baltimore Ravens, but he saw enough to know "Whitt" was a great fit in that respect.

"All he cares about is family and football. He was an absolutely awesome guy to work for," Esposito said. "He's a great man, super smart, remembers everything, and a really, really good football coach.

"In the few conversations we had about football, I was extremely impressed. The

Whittingham is Michigan's eighth head coach since 1969, when Bo Schembechler took over for Bump Elliott. All but one (Rich Rodriguez, 2008) won at least eight games in their first season at the helm.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Whittingham's Year-By-Year Record

Year	School	Overall Record	Conf. Record	Bowl (Result)
2004*	Utah	1-0	0-0, MWC	Fiesta vs. Pittsburgh (W, 35-7)
2005	Utah	7-5	4-4, MWC	Emerald vs. Georgia Tech (W, 38-10)
2006	Utah	8-5	5-3, MWC	Armed Forces vs. Tulsa (W, 25-13)
2007	Utah	9-4	5-3, MWC	Poinsettia vs. Navy (W, 35-32)
2008	Utah	13-0	8-0, MWC	Sugar vs. Alabama (W, 31-17)
2009	Utah	10-3	6-2, MWC	Poinsettia vs. Cal (W, 37-27)
2010	Utah	10-3	7-1, MWC	Las Vegas vs. Boise State (L, 26-3)
2011	Utah	8-5	4-5, Pac-12	Sun vs. Georgia Tech (W, 30-27 OT)
2012	Utah	5-7	3-6, Pac-12	—
2013	Utah	5-7	2-7, Pac-12	—
2014	Utah	9-4	5-4, Pac-12	Las Vegas vs. Colorado State (W, 45-10)
2015	Utah	10-3	6-3, Pac-12	Las Vegas vs. BYU (W, 35-28)
2016	Utah	9-4	5-4, Pac-12	Foster Farms vs. Indiana (W, 26-24)
2017	Utah	7-6	3-6, Pac-12	Heart of Dallas vs. West Virginia (W, 30-14)
2018	Utah	9-5	6-3, Pac-12	Holiday vs. Northwestern (L, 31-20)
2019	Utah	11-3	8-1, Pac-12	Alamo vs. Texas (L, 38-10)
2020	Utah	3-2	3-2, Pac-12	—
2021	Utah	10-4	8-1, Pac-12	Rose vs. Ohio State (L, 48-45)
2022	Utah	10-4	7-2, Pac-12	Rose vs. Penn State (L, 35-21)
2023	Utah	8-5	5-4, Pac-12	Las Vegas vs. Northwestern (L, 14-7)
2024	Utah	5-7	2-7, Big 12	—
2025	Utah	10-2	7-2, Big 12	*Las Vegas vs. Nebraska (W, 44-22)**
TOTALS		**177-88 (.668)**	**109-70 (.609)**	**11-6 (.647)**

** Whittingham did not coach in the 2025 bowl game, so the win is not included among his totals*

How First-Year Michigan Coaches Have Fared Over The Years

Kyle Whittingham is Michigan's eighth head coach since 1969, when Bo Schembechler took over for Bump Elliott. Here's how the previous seven fared in their first seasons at the helm.

Bo Schembechler (1969-89): Schembechler inherited a talented team but started his first season only 3-2 with a blowout home loss to Missouri and a disappointing setback at Michigan State. From there, though, his Wolverines took off, winning four straight Big Ten blowouts to set up a showdown with Woody Hayes and Ohio State. The Wolverines upset the "team of the century," 24-12 in 1969, in a defining moment for the Schembechler era.

Michigan lost the Rose Bowl to USC, 10-3, a game Schembechler missed due to a heart attack, to finish 8-3 overall (6-1 Big Ten) and ranked No. 8 in the coaches' poll and No. 9 in the Associated Press poll.

Gary Moeller (1990-1994): Michigan had won two straight Big Ten titles when Moeller took over following Schembechler's sudden retirement, and Moeller made it three in 1990 — but not conventionally. The Wolverines dropped three games, including the opener at Notre Dame in a game they dominated for long stretches, but rose back to No. 1 before losing to Michigan State in controversial fashion. A home loss to Iowa followed before they ripped off six straight wins to end the year at 9-3 (6-2 Big Ten), including a victory at Ohio State for a share of the Big Ten in a four-way tie, and a 35-3 drubbing of Ole Miss in the Gator Bowl.

Moeller's first team finished No. 8 in the coaches' poll, No. 7 AP.

Lloyd Carr (1995-2007). Carr replaced Moeller on an interim basis following his predecessor's abrupt firing, and it appeared his debut would end poorly. But Michigan rallied from 17-0 down versus Virginia for an 18-17, last-second win, started 5-0 in 1995 and reached No. 7 before an upset loss to Northwestern at home slowed the progress.

Carr was given the job permanently and led the Wolverines to a 31-23 win over No. 2 Ohio State in the regular-season finale. But U-M lost three of its last five games, including the Alamo Bowl to Texas A&M, to finish 9-4 (5-3 Big Ten), No. 19 in the coaches' poll, No. 17 AP.

Rich Rodriguez (2008-2010). Much of the talent, especially offensively, left or graduated when Carr retired, leaving Rodriguez in a tough spot. The biggest problem — the Wolverines had no proven quarterback, and that would be a huge part of their issue in 2008.

A two-point loss to Utah to open the year was closer than it should have been, and though a stunning upset of No. 9 Wisconsin in Week 4 followed a loss at Notre Dame, it was fool's gold. U-M dropped five straight after that, including a terrible home loss to a bad Toledo team, and got handled by all three rivals to finish 3-9 (2-6 Big Ten).

Brady Hoke (2011-14): The Hoke era began with a win over Western Michigan in 2011 and then one of the most incredible comebacks in Michigan football history. U-M rallied in the program's first-ever home night game, a 35-31 victory over Notre Dame, and the Wolverines were dominant in improving to 6-0 and No. 11 nationally. A fourth straight loss to MSU, this one on the road, and another at Iowa on a bitterly cold day were the only blemishes for a team that finished 11-2 (6-2 Big Ten) with wins over OSU and then Virginia Tech in the Sugar Bowl to cap the year. Michigan finished No. 9 in the coaches' poll, No. 12 AP.

Jim Harbaugh (2015-23): Harbaugh inherited a team with talent, but one coming off a disappointing 5-7 season in Hoke's last year. The 2015 season started with a tough, 24-17 loss at Utah, and included the fluke "trouble with the snap" setback to Michigan State at home in what should have been a win.

Ohio State hammered Harbaugh's first U-M team, 42-13, the first of five straight over the coach before he'd capture the last three, but a 41-7 win over Florida in the Citrus Bowl put a nice bow on a solid first season. Michigan finished 10-3 overall (6-2 Big Ten), No. 11 in the coaches' poll, No. 12 AP.

Sherrone Moore (2024-25): Moore inherited championship DNA, but the Wolverines didn't have a capable quarterback and were inconsistent defensively in his first year. A 31-12 home loss to Texas was a huge disappointment, and losses at Washington and Illinois weren't good, either. Moore's team salvaged the year somewhat with wins at Ohio State and in the ReliaQuest Bowl versus Alabama, but it was a disappointing campaign at 8-5 overall and 5-4 in the conference.

— Chris Balas

guy has been doing it a long time, from assistant coach, coaching defense, to being a head coach. His dad was a DC, his son's a coach … he was awesome. The whole staff was great. It was a pleasure to be around those guys."

His style, too, is conducive to what we've seen of the Wolverines' best teams over the years. Never the "air it out" type, Whittingham wants to win the lines of scrimmage, out-tough his opponent and win the fourth quarter. A good running game usually goes hand in hand with that, so it's no surprise last year's 10-2 Utah team finished top-five in the nation in rushing.

As was the case with Michigan fans and their coaches, the Utes' faithful sometimes got a bit frustrated when he played it closer to the vest and to his defense. If he can be adaptable and turn his talent loose, "allowing for more explosive plays and not just settling for the hard-nosed approach," Utah writer Josh Furlong of KSL said, he could really do something special at Michigan.

"Kyle's the type of guy that likes to milk the clock, so he likes to be able to control the tempo, control the game," Furlong said. "In the games over the last few years, he's really tried to lean into letting his coordinators just have the say. He's obviously involved in third- and fourth-down decisions and trying to make sure they make the best plays.

"But he's a defensive guy. He's known defense for his entire life — he played defense, he coached defense. So, there's always been an emphasis on that. It's really just making sure that he's not handcuffing it."

If he lets offensive coordinator Jason Beck do what he wants, Furlong added, "Michigan is going to be OK." If he's being honest, though, Furlong would probably acknowledge they'll be just fine even if the head coach has more of a say. He didn't win 177 games with largely three-star prep talent over the years not knowing what he's doing, and there's a reason Hill called him "extremely disciplined and extremely intelligent," the best coach he's ever been around.

"I have more respect for Coach Whitt than any coach in the game," Hill said. … "When you sit down with him, you're like, 'Man — this guy is brilliant.' That's what I always saw in him and why I stayed with him for so long, why I was willing to come back with him.

"I just see 'special' in Coach Whitt. He's a coach of all coaches."

And the right man for Michigan at the right time, ready to make his mark on the biggest stage.

Everything he's done and said to date indicates he's got a great shot. ❑

Head coach Kyle Whittingham, after addressing his players at the end of the spring game, told the media that his first Michigan team is "on track" and "we've got a lot of opportunity ahead of us to get better."
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

2026 Season Preview

Kyle Whittingham, Year 1 — Talented Team, But Question Marks

BY CHRIS BALAS

As a famous ad campaign goes, "Life comes at you fast." Two head coaches found that out last December when Sherrone Moore was relieved of his duties as Michigan head coach and Kyle Whittingham, who many felt would be a lifer at Utah, found the opportunity of a lifetime at 66 years old and agreed to replace him.

It was a stunning development in the college football world. But given the whispers of misconduct under Moore's regime (that were later verified) and the culture decline during the first two post-Jim Harbaugh years, it worked out about as well as it could have for the Wolverines. Whittingham kept the roster mostly intact, inherited a group of players he feels are hungry and dedicated, and provides a much-needed stability and level of respect to the program.

"I'm a Buckeye, so my first thought was, 'What!?'" former Utah and Ohio State coach Urban Meyer, who once employed Whittingham as his defensive coordinator at Utah, said this spring. "He's my friend. Kyle and I are really close, and it didn't take long for me to put two and two together. Not only did I tell him that I think it was a great move, but it was exactly what that school in Ann Arbor needed.

"They fell into the perfect guy."

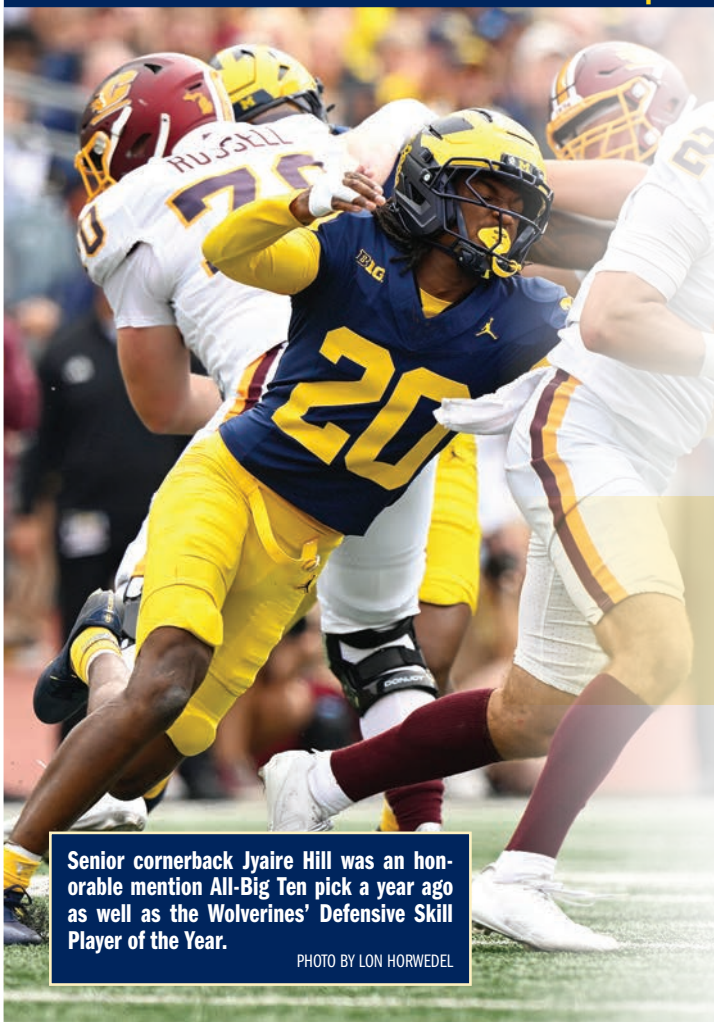
And after a productive spring, Whittingham believes his first Michigan team is right where it needs to be.

"We're not where we need to be ultimately, but I think we're on track given that it's April 18th and we've got a lot of opportunity ahead of us to get better," he said.

"We saw the same thing last year at Utah. We had the same exact situation. … We installed an entire new offense, and I'd say we're right on par with where we need to be relative to what happened last year. We ended up with a really good offense last year, third or fourth in the nation in scoring and second in rushing. So, there's no panic at all. We feel like we're heading in the right direction."

Here's our annual look at the Michigan team — impact players, biggest games, top position groups, and more — heading into the 2026 campaign.

Top Five Players



Senior cornerback Jyaire Hill was an honorable mention All-Big Ten pick a year ago as well as the Wolverines' Defensive Skill Player of the Year.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Michigan didn't have a first-round NFL Draft pick for the first time since 2018, but the Wolverines still lost some good players, including edges Derrick Moore and Jaishawn Barham. Here's a look at U-M's best returning talents:

1. Junior RB Jordan Marshall — Marshall took a backseat to Justice Haynes a year ago, but when Haynes went down with injury, the Ohio native showed what he could do. He ripped off four consecutive 100-yard games from Oct. 18 to Nov. 15, showing off great power and speed, and finished with a team-high 932 yards and 10 touchdowns. He should be the bell cow in the backfield if he can stay healthy. He's a downhill runner with great feet and more than adequate speed.

2. Sophomore WR Andrew Marsh — Marsh might have had the most impressive season for a true freshman receiver since Mario Manningham in 2005, showing elite ability with 179 yards in a win over Northwestern and finishing the season with 651 yards and 4 touchdowns. He's a solid No. 1 on the depth chart this spring, Whittingham said, and was a priority to re-sign in the offseason.

3. Senior CB Jyaire Hill — Hill has all the physical skills, but can he be consistent and reliable? We believe he can with the proper coaching, which he'll now have with the new staff.

Hill was the Wolverines' Defensive Skill Player of the Year and an honorable mention All-Big Ten selection a year ago. He only notched 1 pick but was in position for several others — the expectation is those pass break-ups become interceptions this year.

4. Senior DT Trey Pierce — The 6-2, 310-pound honorable mention All-Big Ten selection is just scratching the surface of his potential after being named the team's co-Most Improved Player on Defense last year. He had an outstanding spring as the best player on a position group Whittingham called one of their most impressive.

5. Senior DE John Henry Daley — The Utah transfer is coming off a significant leg injury suffered late last season, but he's back near full strength this summer and could be a force on the edge. He notched 17.5 tackles for loss and 11.5 sacks a year ago and earned first-team All-America honors from the Walter Camp Football Foundation.

Top Five Players To Watch

Michigan has plenty of good young talent, and many players will get a chance to show what they can do in 2026. Here are the top five to keep an eye on:

1. Sophomore WR JJ Buchanan — By the end of the year, it's possible we're saying, "Why wasn't he on the top five list?" He was impressive as a freshman tight end at Utah, catching 26 passes for 427 yards with 5 touchdowns, and they'll move him all around to create mismatches. "He's a stud," spring observers told us.

2. Sophomore OT Andrew Babalola — The 6-6, 315-pound Babalola was slated to play last year before suffering a season-ending knee injury in August, but he's healing and should be good to go this fall. Whittingham mentioned not having some of his best linemen available for spring ball — Babalola is No. 1 on that list. He was a top-five priority to re-sign after last year even with the injury, which should tell you all you need to know about his perceived value.

3. Sophomore LB Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng —Owusu-Boateng joins senior Troy Bowles and fellow sophomore Chase Taylor as likely starters, and all of them are players to watch. Each earned praise from the defensive coaches this spring, and they'll all need to step up and play beyond their experience. Owusu-Boateng is an outstanding athlete who will only get better.

4. Sophomore S Jordan Young — The 6-0, 195-pounder emerged on the scene with a big game at Northwestern in which he shared Defensive Player of the Week honors, breaking up a big third-down pass late in the game. He played in 10 games on defense last year but should have a much bigger role this season.

5. Junior DE Lugard Edokpayi — Sophomore Nate Marshall had his moments at edge last year, but Edokpayi's raw natural ability made him a problem for the Michigan offense this spring. The 6-7, 250-pounder has the potential to be an outstanding pass rusher, and he's made big strides.

Sophomore safety Jordan Young appears ready for a larger role in the defensive secondary after flashes of brilliance a year ago.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

1. Nov. 28 at Ohio State

Always and forever, this game will be the most anticipated on the schedule. The Buckeyes beat their hated rivals for the first time since 2019 last year, a 27-9 win in the Big House, but the Wolverines have a new and better coach and staff, and enough high-end talent to at least hang with Ryan Day's team.

Michigan will need to run the ball to win, but that's Whittingham's forte. Defensive coordinator Jay Hill's defense — full of disguise and unpredictability — is the kind that can make it tough on a quarterback like Julian Sayin.

Can U-M make it three straight on the road in Columbus?

Ohio State won last year's matchup, 27-9, breaking Michigan's four-game win streak in "The Game." The Wolverines will head to Columbus Nov. 28 to continue the rivalry.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Top Five Most Anticipated Games

2. Sept. 12 vs. Oklahoma — The game in Norman was No. 2 on this list last year since it was the first opportunity to see what the Wolverines had against a good team (the early "litmus test"). The Wolverines failed miserably, and it was a sign of things to come against the good teams on the schedule.

The Sooners will return quarterback John Mateer, who burned U-M for 270 yards passing a year ago, and a very good defense. A win here in the second game of the year could really kickstart Whittingham's first season.

3. Nov. 14 at Oregon — Michigan just doesn't win on the West Coast in true road games. They lost at USC last year and to a mediocre Washington team in Seattle two years ago — 1989 was the last victory, and the Wolverines needed to recover a late onside kick and got a game winning field goal from J.D. Carlson to beat UCLA.

The Ducks are in just about everyone's preseason top 5, ranked No. 2 in ESPN's "way too early" spring poll and return an outstanding quarterback in Dante Moore. On paper and given the location, it might be the toughest game on the schedule.

4. Oct. 24 vs. Indiana — We chuckled when coach Curt Cignetti shared his championship expectations for the program when he first arrived at IU. We're not laughing anymore. The Hoosiers lose a lot of talent from their 16-0 national championship team, including Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback Fernando Mendoza, but the culture is intact. Cignetti has brought in another impressive portal haul, and there's championship DNA on that team. One thing working in Michigan's favor — Indiana will face Ohio State at home a week earlier in what should be a tough and emotional game.

5. Oct. 17 vs. Penn State — There's a lot unknown about this PSU team until Matt Campbell's squad plays a few games, but we know the former Iowa State head man can coach. His teams often overachieved, and as a "culture" guy, his players always seemed to play hard for him in Ames.

The Nittany Lions will suit up 39 transfers this year, and 24 played for Campbell at Iowa State. That includes quarterback Rocco Becht, who has won 26 games as a starter and thrown for 3,000-plus yards in two seasons. This game should be like playing an Iowa State team with a bit more talent.

Top Five True Freshman Candidates To Play

Michigan's 26-man group of incoming freshmen was ranked No. 11 nationally in the Rivals.com Industry Ranking and No. 4 in the Big Ten. Here's our list of the most likely to see the field in 2026:

1. RB Savion Hiter

This one's a no-brainer. Hiter, an early enrollee, turned heads from the minute he stepped on campus, is already the Wolverines' No. 2 back coming out of spring ball (behind junior Jordan Marshall) and is "going to be special" in Whittingham's own words.

"The future starts now," Whittingham said in May. "He'll be getting carries from Game 1."

2. WR Salesi Moa

A former Utah pledge, Moa enrolled early and quickly made an impact. A two-way player at Ogden (Utah) Fremont High, where he caught 226 passes for 3,757 yards and 44 touchdowns, he enjoyed an outstanding first several practices before hitting a wall, but he finished strong.

Whittingham has included him in the top four in about every update on the receiving group, and he's expected to play a significant role this year. He's a great athlete.

3. DE Carter Meadows

A five-star product of Bethesda (Md.) Gonzaga, Meadows could provide help as a situational pass rusher on the edge. The 6-6, 235-pounder is incredibly athletic with a quick first step and has a frame to add good weight. He'll play on special teams at the very least, but he could be too good to keep off the field.

4. WR Travis Johnson

A borderline top-100 prep, Johnson eclipsed 1,000 yards in each of his last two high school seasons and helped lead Chesapeake (Va.) Oscar Smith High to consecutive state championships. Johnson, an early enrollee, got a lot of run this spring, including occasional reps with the first-stringers.

5. OL Malakai Lee

The Gatorade Player of the Year in Hawai'i already has a collegiate build at 6-7, 350, and boasts outstanding strength. Many believe he'll have a role, potentially as the "rhino" lineman when the Wolverines go heavy with six offensive linemen on the field.

True freshman Salesi Moa's speed and quickness should get him early reps at receiver and potentially in the return game as well.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Top Five Question Marks

1. Will Bryce Underwood take the second-year leap and emerge as a weapon at quarterback?

After seeing the then-freshman's first game, a win over New Mexico in which he threw for 251 yards and made some incredible throws, we were prepared to see a generational talent in Ann Arbor. Before you say we were overreacting, keep in mind that Lobos coach Jason Eck said the same ("I can tell my grandkids I played against Bryce Underwood one day"), as did former OSU coach and current Fox analyst Urban Meyer ("He's going to be a problem" for the Big Ten).

But Underwood didn't have a dedicated quarterbacks coach, and his protection wasn't good enough much of the season. As such, he seemed to regress a bit by year's end. He had an up-and-down spring by all accounts, and while he's still been anointed the team's No. 1 QB, he has a lot to prove this fall.

2. Will the defensive front seven be good enough — especially the linebackers?

We felt better when coach Kyle Whittingham called the defensive line a strength this spring, and especially after we saw them get after it in the spring game. And that was without transfer edge John Henry Daley on the field — he's still recovering from a lower leg injury.

It's the linebackers, though, that we'll be watching closely. There's some good young talent here in Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng, Troy Bowles, and Chase Taylor, but none of these guys has played a lot of football. They'll need to get up to speed in a hurry — you can't let teams run on you in the Big Ten.

3. Can special teams, especially the kicking game, be a strength?

Last year was disappointing in almost all facets, but the group immediately showed signs of improvement when Kerry Coombs replaced former special teams coach J.B. Brown for the bowl game in December. The punting game wasn't good enough, but there's hope that it will improve dramatically under UNLV transfer Cam Brown. The Aussie-style kicker has great accuracy to go with a big leg. Pitt transfer Trey Butkowski had a great freshman season and a good spring and should be fine at kicker, though he doesn't have proven range (zero makes over 50 yards last year).

We expect field position improvement to be noticeable this year under Coombs' guidance — that can be the difference in the close games.

4. Will the injured Wolverines come back to make an impact?

Because if they do, that elevates this team's ceiling tremendously. Daley was an All-American at Utah last year after notching 11.5 sacks in just 11 games, and he can be a game changer. Graduate safety Rod Moore is elite when healthy. And sophomore Andrew Babalola can be a difference maker on the offensive line if he returns 100 percent from knee surgery.

5. Is there enough depth at cornerback?

Whittingham acknowledged this was a group that needed a few guys to step up following spring. Veterans Jyaire Hill and transfer Smith Snowden should be very good and another, Zeke Berry, can play there, too. But they need some of the young guys like Shamari Earls to up their games.

All eyes will be on quarterback Bryce Underwood to see whether he will take a leap forward in his sophomore season after starting every game as a true freshman.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Top Five Strongest Position Groups

1. Defensive Line — The line was solid but inconsistent last year, especially when it came to generating a pass rush. The word from spring practice this year is they need a few more edges to step up in that department. Junior Dominic Nichols has all the tools but needs to bring it every day, and they're hopeful Utah transfer John Henry Daley will live up to his All-America billing when he returns from injury.

On the interior, veterans Enow Etta and Trey Pierce provide a great foundation to help stop the run, but they'll need several others to emerge in backup roles. Senior Cam Brandt had a good spring, though, and junior Devyid Palepale flashed in the spring game.

2. Running Backs — Though he was limited by injury late last year, junior Jordan Marshall is the best returning player on this team. He runs hard and with passion, was the team's co-Offensive Player of the Year, and has a captain's mentality. If he stays healthy, he should easily eclipse 1,000 yards rushing. He could also contribute more in the passing game as a receiver.

Veteran Bryson Kuzdzal showed flashes in running for 326 yards and 4 scores, but he'll have a hard time holding off "special" frosh Savion Hiter. Whittingham already reported Hiter would get meaningful carries in Game 1.

3. Secondary — Once again, much of this group's success is going to depend on graduate student Rod Moore's return to health, exactly what we wrote in this piece last year. If he's healthy, this group's ceiling is raised tremendously, and it sounds like he will be.

Senior cornerback Jyaire Hill took a big step this spring and has the physical tools to play in the NFL, and grad student Zeke Berry has played a lot of football. Transfer Chris Bracy at safety and Utah corner transfer Smith Snowden should both elevate their positions.

4. Wide Receivers — Yes, we're buying the hype with this group, though it appears it's going to be top heavy. Sophomore Andrew Marsh had an outstanding freshman season and should be primed for a huge sophomore year, and Utah transfer and sophomore JJ Buchanan had a great spring and is the No. 2 guy, at worst. Texas transfer Jaime Ffrench and true freshman Salesi Moa were the others in the top four after spring, but they'll be pushed by frosh Travis Johnson and others.

5. Offensive Line — We're betting on line coach Jim Harding, because there's talent here. Three starters return — Andrew Sprague, Jake Guarnera and Blake Frazier — from a group that opened holes for a very effective running game, and now they're bigger, stronger and more experienced. They needed work on pass protection this spring, but there's still time before the Sept. 5 opener.

Michigan's Team 147 will kick off the 2026 season when it takes the field on Sept. 5 against Western Michigan.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Top Five Goals In 2026

Michigan should put a better, more disciplined product on the field under first-year coach Kyle Whittingham for a few reasons — no off-field distractions and better coaching overall among them. The schedule is tough, but there's talent and expectations. Here are this year's top five goals:

1. Re-establish the Michigan culture.

By all accounts, this has pretty much already been accomplished. Whittingham is a no-nonsense guy, and he set the bar high for his inherited Wolverines with a grueling offseason strength program led by Doug Elisaia. They more than answered the bell, he said, showing him he'd gotten a group of hard workers intent on winning the right way.

This will be a team in Whittingham's image going forward, and that's a huge positive.

2. Make the College Football Playoff.

The Wolverines play several teams ranked in the preseason, but there are eight home games. If they go 2-2 in the "swing" games — Oklahoma and Indiana at home, Oregon and Ohio State on the road — they're all but guaranteed a spot in the 12-team field. Even 9-3 possibly earns a berth given the strength of schedule.

As Whittingham said, making the playoff is always the expectation at Michigan.

3. Develop Bryce Underwood.

The Michigan sophomore quarterback's success will determine the ceiling of this team — period. We expect the run game to be strong, the defense to improve throughout the year, and the special teams to be much better, but elite quarterback play can elevate a team by itself.

We saw what Underwood could do at times last year, including the opener with New Mexico and a home game against Washington. If he can be the guy, this team could contend in the Big Ten.

4. Get the offensive line up to snuff.

They couldn't ask for a better teacher than Jim Harding, one of the best line coaches in the nation according to the experts. His track record at Utah speaks for itself — he had two first-round NFL draft picks this spring. Harding's objective is to mold several good players into a great line, and it starts with junior center Jake Guarnera. He was the top lineman in camp, and it's up to others to improve.

Pass protection was still an issue this spring, but Whittingham believes they'll be fine, especially when they get a few players back to full health (probably sophomore Andrew Babalola in some capacity and senior guard Evan Link).

5. Get special teams back on track.

Even kicker Dominic Zvada struggled last year (after an elite 2024 season) on a unit that literally had no strengths. The punting game was poor, return teams, coverage ... all of it led to "a third of the game," as coaches like to call it, being a weak link. They are expected to make a huge leap under assistant Kerry Coombs after a productive spring and with a new kicker and punter on tap.

Junior running back Jordan Marshall was named a captain during the spring and is a likely pick to be selected for the leadership role by his teammates for the 2026 season.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

MICHIGAN'S 2026 CAPTAINS:
Best Bets

The Wolverines have one former captain returning in Rod Moore, but there are few obvious candidates among the seniors returning to fill the other spots. Here are our thoughts on who the team might select:

DEFENSE — DB ROD MOORE

The veteran returning two-time captain was one of four captains appointed for spring, and he's the unequivocal leader of this team. He's a veteran with experience who is respected by everyone at Schembechler Hall.

The dark horse — DT Trey Pierce: Pierce was another spring captain, and he took a huge step in the "vocal leadership" department this year. He's always been a hard worker, and it wouldn't surprise if he were defensive captain No. 2.

OFFENSE — RB JORDAN MARSHALL

It's not often juniors get the call to be Michigan captains, but Marshall could well get the nod. Teammates voted him one of the spring captains, and he made his love for the program clear even before he arrived in Ann Arbor. He's got the work ethic and the leadership to be a great one.

The dark horse — TE Zack Marshall: The senior tight end has a great head on his shoulders and has been a very good teammate. He has the respect of everyone on the team.

Senior Trey Pierce took on more of a "vocal leadership" role in the offseason and is a potential defensive captain this fall.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Burning Questions

College Football Experts Preview Michigan's 2026 Season

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

Three of the most prominent national college football voices — Sporting News' Bill Bender, CBS Sports' Tom Fornelli, and Athlon Sports' Steven Lassan — weigh in on Michigan ahead of the 2026 season. The panel of experts discusses the Kyle Whittingham hire, predictions for the Wolverines and makes picks for the Big Ten and national titles.

Considering the unique situation and timing following Sherrone Moore's firing, how would you assess the Kyle Whittingham hire?

Bender: A ground-rule double. It's difficult to label Whittingham a home run given [Alabama's] Kalen DeBoer and [Arizona State's] Kenny Dillingham were rumored candidates, but Whittingham feels like hires such as Mike Elko at Texas A&M or Jeff Brohm at Louisville. It's a no-nonsense hire that should produce results on the field and less embarrassment off it. Sherrone Moore was fired on Dec. 10 and the Wolverines were able to land Whittingham on Dec. 26. That was an after-Christmas present for the program at that point — and it brings an aura of reputability back to Michigan.

Fornelli: It's a best-case scenario. Typically, in a situation like this you'd expect a program to scramble and go with some sort of temporary fix. One of the best coaches in the country isn't typically sitting at home after being forced out of their old job after dominating there for 20 years! Given everything we know now about what was going on behind the scenes under Moore, there's no way to look at this situation other than as an upgrade for the Wolverines.

Lassan: Whittingham is a massive upgrade over Moore, and I think it's a home-run hire for Michigan. Hiring a proven head coach with a track record of winning after the early signing period and around the first transfer portal window is challenging for any program. However, the Wolverines pulled off the rare move of overcoming that timing by hiring arguably one of college football's current top 10 coaches. Whittingham comes to Michigan after recording 177 victories and eight double-digit win totals at Utah. He also thrived at developing talent and consistently got the most out of his roster in Salt Lake City. Also, the Utes played a style that will translate to the Big Ten with an ability to win in the trenches on both sides of the ball, elite defensive play, and standout special teams. This is an A-plus caliber hire for Michigan considering the unique situation and unusually bad timing to hire a coach.

How well do you believe Whittingham can compete at the highest level of the sport with increased resources at Michigan?

Bender: Whittingham produced four 10-win seasons in the last seven years at Utah. Michigan has three 10-win seasons in the same time frame. He can get Michigan back to double-digit wins and Big Ten and College Football Playoff contention. Whittingham led Utah to success in the Mountain West Conference, Pac-12 and Big 12 — and he will naturally adjust to the competition in the Big Ten. Whittingham led Utah to an 11-6 record against BYU in the Holy War. He does not need much schooling in the importance of rivalry matchups against Ohio State and Michigan State.

Fornelli: I don't know that Whittingham will win a national title at Michigan, but that's more about how difficult it currently is to win one, and how much more difficult it will be when the playoff likely expands again. That said, I see no reason why Whittingham can't have Michigan competing at the top of the Big Ten fighting for conference titles and playoff berths every season. He was able to do so at Utah through multiple conferences, and while the MWC, Pac-12 and Big 12 may not have the top-heavy programs the Big Ten has, he's at one of those top-heavy programs now.

Lassan: It's no guarantee a coach who won at a lower level or easier conference can translate that to the Big Ten. However, I feel confident Whittingham won't have much trouble adapting to or competing at the highest level of college football at Michigan.

I just think Whittingham is a winner who should be motivated with a window of opportunity to chase a national championship at one of the top programs in college football. Developing talent, mining the portal and hiring quality assistant coaches were all strengths of Whittingham in Salt Lake City. All of those qualities will easily translate to Ann Arbor.

How big of a jump do you expect sophomore QB Bryce Underwood to make this season, and how much of the Wolverines' potential in 2026 is riding on his improvement?

Bender: It's about bridging the gap between the immense talent that made Underwood a five-star recruit in high school and the inconsistency he showed as a freshman. Underwood had six games with less than 200 passing yards and an 86.4 passer rating against ranked teams. Development was an issue. Still, Underwood is a next-level arm talent, and offensive coordinator Jason Beck brought out the best in Devon Dampier at Utah last season. Underwood

New Michigan head coach Kyle Whittingham had four 10-win teams in his last seven years at Utah. Michigan had three during the same period.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

should improve — but the Wolverines also still have questions at receiver. Whittingham and new offensive coordinator Beck will help find a middle ground, but there will still be bouts with inconsistency against the top defenses on the schedule.

Fornelli: We all probably need to temper our expectations when it comes to quarterbacks these days, because we all get so focused on the guys who figure it out right away and ignore all the examples of guys needing time. Last year, Underwood was a true freshman adapting to big-time college football under a coaching staff that was an absolute mess. Now he's a sophomore with adults in the room running things, but he's once again learning a new offense. In many ways, this is like a second freshman season. The good news is the learning curve should be sped up because he knows the lay of the land now in a way he didn't last season. I expect to see improvement, but not to the level of being the best QB in the conference. I do think Michigan can reach the playoff with mild improvement, but if the hope is for a deep postseason run, Underwood needs to take a significant step.

Lassan: I'm expecting a big jump from Bryce Underwood this season. It's no secret the expectations were unbelievably high for Underwood in '25 as a true freshman. However, I thought his year went as expected with flashes of talent but also plenty of areas to improve upon. That theme continued into the spring, and it may take some time to adapt to the new staff and scheme.

Entering '26, Ohio State's Julian Sayin, Oregon's Dante Moore, USC's Jayden Maiava, Washington's Demond Williams Jr. and Indiana's Josh Hoover are likely to be the consensus top five signal-callers in the Big Ten. A jump into that tier isn't out of the question, but I think it's more reasonable to expect Underwood to rank into that second tier of quarterbacks in the conference.

New play-caller Jason Beck is one of the Big Ten's top coordinator hires this offseason and has thrived at working with mobile quarterbacks. His ability to mesh Underwood's strengths with a scheme that produced instant results at Utah last season should help the sophomore's development. Ultimately, I think Underwood's play will determine just how high Michigan climbs in the Big Ten. This team has the right mix of defense, rushing

College Football Experts' 2026 Predictions

Expert	Michigan Record	Big Ten Champion	National Champion	Breakout Team
Bill Bender	9-3	Indiana	Indiana	Louisville
Tom Fornelli	9-3	Ohio State	Georgia	Florida
Steven Lassan	9-3	Ohio State	Ohio State	Florida

attack, and offensive line to make a run at the playoff. If Underwood makes a big jump as a passer and gets a little more help from the supporting cast at receiver, then double-digit wins and a playoff spot are all within reach.

Jason Beck engineered a productive offense at Utah in 2025. What does he bring to Michigan?

Bender: Utah jumped from 102nd to fourth in scoring offense with Beck last season. The Utes ranked second in the FBS in rushing offense at 266.3 yards per game — which fits into the core of Michigan's offense since the Bo Schembechler era. Utah quarterbacks combined for 27 TDs and 5 interceptions last season. Michigan QBs have 23 TDs and 23 interceptions the last two seasons. The pass offense has been embarrassing in spots — and Beck should be able to tweak that, too. Michigan should be able to play better complementary football if Underwood continues that developmental arc.

Fornelli: It'll be interesting to see what adjustments Beck makes because I assume he won't use Underwood as a rusher the same way he did with Devon Dampier at both Utah and New Mexico. We'll likely see Underwood use his legs more than last year, but only to a point. I suspect the biggest change for Michigan fans to adjust to will be that, after years of efficient, bludgeoning offenses, this will be a scheme hunting big plays.

Lassan: Whittingham didn't have a ton of staff turnover during his time at Utah, but he needed an improved offense prior to '25 and went out and hired Beck from New Mexico. The familiarity Whittingham and Beck established in one season with the Utes should pay big-time dividends at Michigan to allow this program to hit the ground running. Beck runs a physical offense that Whittingham likes and has no trouble deploying the quarterback as a runner. The personnel in place — namely a strong offensive line and talented backfield — should suit Beck's strengths as a play-caller.

Another asset of Beck's offenses has been productivity. Utah ranked first in the Big 12 in total offense last year, while his '24 attack at New Mexico also led the Mountain West. It also doesn't hurt that Beck is a former quarterback who can relate to and teach a younger player like Underwood. He also had a knack for finding ways to deploy or use different playmakers to the best of their abilities at New Mexico and Utah.

Sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood and junior running back Jordan Marshall will be the center of attention, but our panel college football analysts expects U-M to open up the offense while hunting big plays in the passing game.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

What are your expectations for the Michigan offense?

Bender: [Junior] Jordan Marshall and [former U-M running back] Justice Haynes combined for 1,789 rushing yards and 20 TDs last season. Marshall and five-star freshman Savion Hiter might not match those numbers, but it could be a committee of sorts depending on how much Underwood is involved in the running game. It should get better as the season progresses. Can [sophomore] Texas transfer Jaime Ffrench emerge as a reliable target opposite [sophomore] Andrew Marsh? The offensive line should be solid, too. The Wolverines had 37 turnovers the last two seasons. Utah had 6 last season. That area needs to see significant improvement in 2026.

Fornelli: It will be more explosive and score more than it did last year, that I'm confident about. How much more it scores will depend largely on growth from Underwood, as well as Andrew Marsh, whom I am extremely high on.

Lassan: Michigan's offense holds the key to its '26 season. Underwood's development is the biggest X-factor, but Beck and Whittingham have to get better play

out of the receivers for this offense to also reach its potential. The pieces are in place for improvement on the outside with [sophomore] JJ Buchanan (Utah) and Jaime Ffrench (Texas) joining from the portal to team with rising star Andrew Marsh. The offensive line should be a top-10 group nationally, and the one-two punch of Jordan Marshall and Savion Hiter forms a top tandem in the backfield.

In addition to Underwood's development and the overall production out of the passing attack, Michigan needs to generate a few more big plays and do a better job in the red zone at scoring touchdowns. Those factors likely determine where this unit stacks up in the Big Ten. With Beck, I think the Wolverines have upgraded at coordinator and the personnel is all in place for a step forward on the stat sheet. It might not be the No. 1 offense in the conference, but Michigan should be better on this side of the ball -- largely due to Underwood's growth.

Senior Jyaire Hill gives Michigan a lockdown cover corner, and he will help anchor what is expected to be another strong defensive unit this year.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Jay Hill had a stellar run at BYU before Kyle Whittingham poached him to run Michigan's defense. Your thoughts on the hire?

Bender: The Cougars allowed close to 30 points in Hill's first season in 2023, but that number dropped below 20 points per game each of the last two years. The Wolverines were right at that number (20.4) last season. Hill's defense features disruptive linebackers who can generate tackles for loss. The pass rush is solid. Michigan has enjoyed a good run of defensive coordinators from the Harbaugh tree with NFL backgrounds. Hill is a different branch, but it will produce the same steady production.

Fornelli: Love the hire. I love Jay Hill. Honestly, it won't be all that different than what Michigan fans are used to seeing scheme-wise. It may look different, but fundamentally the principles will be largely the same as what's been the norm in Ann Arbor. Michigan defenses have been tough, physical and disciplined for years, and those are all hallmarks of what Jay Hill preaches, too.

Lassan: Similar to Jason Beck, Hill is one of the top coordinator hires in the Big Ten. He took over the play-calling duties for BYU in '23, and after a transition year to the Big 12 that fall, he produced back-to-back units that ranked near the top of the conference. The Cougars allowed fewer than 20 points a game over the last two seasons. The play of the defense was a big reason why BYU nearly made the playoff in back-to-back years.

In addition to just having overall familiarity with Whittingham, Hill isn't going to run a defense that's drastically different from the one [former U-M coordinator] Wink Martindale led last year. An attacking unit with a four-man front that's physical and well-coached seems about as seamless of a transition as possible. Also, similar to what Whittingham did at Utah, Hill consistently got the most out of his roster. I like the Wolverines to have one of the Big Ten's top defenses in '26.

How will Michigan's defense fare?

Bender: BYU had 39 interceptions the last two seasons with Hill, and the secondary will be a strength with [senior] Jyaire Hill, [graduate] Zeke Berry and the return of sixth-year safety Rod Moore. [Senior] Utah transfer Smith Snowden also should make an impact. Will [senior defensive end] John Henry Daley — another Utes transfer who had 11.5 sacks last season before an Achilles injury — be at 100 percent in the fall? The defense allowed an average of 443 total yards in losses to Oklahoma, USC, Ohio State and Texas last season. The Wolverines had just 2 sacks in those losses. It was ordinary at best. That has to improve with Hill.

Fornelli: The Michigan defense will be a Michigan defense. The hallmarks will not change. How it's dressed pre-snap might be. In the end, it will be a top- five defense in the Big Ten, and I'd lean more toward the top three than fourth or fifth.

Lassan: This defense should be one of the better groups in the Big Ten. Not only is the talent in place, but the collective staff braintrust is elite, featuring Whittingham as a defensive-minded coach alongside Hill's success and scheme from BYU.

Despite having only three returning starters, I would not be surprised to see the '26 unit rank higher on the stat sheet than last year's version. Assuming he's back to full strength from an Achilles tear, end John Henry Daley will be among the nation's top pass rushers and fill a key need for the Wolverines up front. Also, the combination of returning players like Jyaire Hill and Zeke Berry, along with safety Rod Moore coming back from injury and transfers Smith Snowden and [junior] Chris Bracy, form the makings of one of the Big Ten's top defensive backfields. The linebacker unit is the biggest concern, but I suspect it won't take long for Hill and Whittingham to find a few answers. ❑

GEARING UP

Q&A With Offensive Coordinator Jason Beck

BY JOHN BORTON

Jason Beck guided one of the top offensive units in the nation last year at Utah, only one season after doing the same at New Mexico. Now he's looking to mastermind a huge rise in Michigan's offensive fortunes over last season. Beck sat down with *The Wolverine* for an exclusive look into where U-M is headed under new head coach Kyle Whittingham.

OFFENSE Q&A

***The Wolverine*: You said this spring you want to adjust the offense to what your personnel does well. At this point, can you identify some of those areas?**

Jason Beck: "We were missing some people in spring that we'll get back, or new players that we'll see. But in terms of personnel, the running back room is strong. The ability to play with two-back schemes will be something we look to do, to get those guys involved. The tight end group is a good, trustworthy group, so I could see us being in 12 personnel, getting multiple tight ends out there. We do a unique thing where we play a sixth O-lineman as a tight end. We'll have him as an eligible member. So, some of that 12 could be what we call 'Big 12' — it's a big tight end, with that lineman.

"The receiver group right now, with [sophomore Andrew] Marsh and [sophomore] JJ Buchanan, they're really strong players. JJ has the ability to make contested catches, plays big. The rest of the group is new and young, but we're optimistic. We'll see what emerges from [sophomore transfer] Jaime Ffrench, [freshman] Salesi Moa, [freshman] Travis Johnson. [Junior Channing] Goodwin was out. He played quite a bit last year, but he was out all spring. We'll see what he does. Then [senior] Kendrick Bell — those guys are jockeying to see who can be that next receiver to be with JJ and Marsh.

"Overall, our running game has been good. The pass game is, what can we do efficiently? What can we do to try to get big plays? The pass protection, just in terms of holding up protecting, we've got a lot of work cut out that way in terms of finding our identity and finding our strengths."

***The Wolverine*: You went through a very similar scenario a year ago, going from New Mexico to Utah. Can you identify some similarities in this remaking of Michigan's offensive schemes?**

Beck: "Michigan, Utah, New Mexico, Syracuse. The last five years, this is my fourth time doing that. So, we know that process of coming in with a whole new offense, and a whole new approach to what was done before. There are things they did well here. It's not like, hey, everything's terrible. There are things they did well that we will keep doing. For instance, the O-line really blocked outside zone well last year. They did that a few different ways that were really productive last year. A lot of those guys are back, so let's keep doing something they've done well.

"We're used to that — coming in, new offense, new everything, fresh start for everybody, identify the talent and put the pieces together. We have a good idea from spring, but it will change from right now until the end of fall camp. It will change Week 1, Week 2, Week 3. There will be tweaks, adjustments when you hit the live bullets. It's always an evolving process."

***The Wolverine*: You experienced great success a year ago, with Utah ranked high in the national statistics. Could something similar happen here, or is it way too early to tell?**

Beck: "It's way down the road. One thing that enabled that last year was really good O-line play. We had an excellent O-line at Utah, and really good quarterback play. The running back group was good, solid, and the receiver group was very limited. We didn't know what we

Under Beck's direction last season, Utah ranked second in the FBS in rushing offense (266.3 yards per game), fourth in total offense (482.9) and fifth in scoring offense (41.2 points per game) with the nation's lowest interception total (5).

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

had. But JJ emerged out of that as a true freshman. So, that kind of took off and took on a life of its own.

"We'll see where this journey takes us, with all of those variables. What we do is challenging to defenses. We're really hard to defend, with what we throw at defenses. We have a lot of advantages, with the way we do things. But when it comes down to it, how well can we block? How good is your quarterback play? That's going to drive that thing more than anything. What does that look like, when we really get into it? There's a lot to be discovered there."

***The Wolverine*: There's obviously been a lot of talk about sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood. Where was he — in terms of the progress you want to see — by the end of spring?**

Beck: "He definitely made progress, got a lot better, but still has a long ways to go. It's a weird thing as a coach. You never feel great about anything, because things are never consistently perfect. We made progress, but there's a lot of work to do, in terms of what we're asking him to do. We have a much better feel for Bryce, so we're really trying to adapt the offense to him.

"When we say build your offense to your personnel, that is the other 10 people, but very importantly, it's around the quarterback with what he does well. We've got a lot of work to do that way, just coaching-wise, making sure we're putting him in the best positions to be successful. Then having him do that at a high level, and at a consistent level."

***The Wolverine*: Can you list two or three advances you'd like to see him make before the start of fall camp?**

Beck: "What we've been working on a lot is his feet, getting a good drop from the O-line, so as pressure comes, you have good space in there. You have a good base. It's being fluid with those feet, and staying in there at times when it's appropriate, to deliver the football. And then, scramble out, make a play when it's time to do that.

"That's really complicated. It sounds really easy, but it's really complicated. When's the time to stand in there and deliver a ball, and when's the time that the protection is breaking down, and I need to escape and extend the play? Right now, it's all about that kind of footwork.

"The second part is the timing with the receivers. Run a route, then throw with great timing. You're not going against a defense, with all those variables. That's what fall camp will address. Right now, it's that footwork, and the timing and chemistry with the receivers."

***The Wolverine*: You ran your quarterback a lot last year. Can we expect to see the same this fall?**

Beck: "There's always a fine line with how you balance what you're doing. I do think it is a strength for Bryce. He's a very capable runner, and that's a weapon for him to attack. How much is going to depend on how much we need to. If our pass game is effective, the receivers are producing, the quarterback is making the reads and delivering, when you're handing the ball off to the backs they're making positive things happen, then there's a little less need to put the pressure on the quarterback.

"Last year, there were times at Utah when those things were not happening, so we had to ask the quarterback to do more. So, that could happen.

"That's one part. The other part is, we do a lot of reads with the quarterback. We'll balance that and account for it. But depending on how they want to play it, play our RPO game and some of our run game, that can cause more QB runs, when you're pulling it, giving it, throwing it, that kind of stuff. Part of it, how is the D playing it and what kind of an advantage can we gain that way?"

***The Wolverine*: How much is the starting offensive line up in the air for the fall?**

Beck: "It's still up in the air. I feel pretty solid about several spots. [Junior tackle] Andrew Sprague had a really strong spring. [Junior center] Jake Guarnera had a really strong spring. Other guys like [redshirt freshman Andrew] Babalola didn't do anything in the spring. He's a guy that we've heard great things about. The film looks extremely promising. How can he impact the mix, in terms of finding your best five?

"[Senior] Evan Link was a guy we barely got to see in the spring. I have his tape from last year, but he barely practiced the last week. So, there are still several things up in the air. Some of those battles remain, to find our top five. And as I mentioned, we'll play with that sixth O-lineman as a big tight end. And what's that Rhino position look like, both who and how much of a strength can that be for us?"

***The Wolverine*: When this offense is up and running, what do you expect to stand out?**

Beck: "There are not a lot of teams every year that are able to run it and throw it over 200 yards a game. It's that kind of balance and attacking that leads to scoring points and winning games. When we're clicking, you're able to be very unpredictable and attack the opponent. You're able to do what you want. To have that kind of balance and that kind of production — both throwing it and running it, to score points and win games — that's what we want to see." ❑

All Eyes On 19

Bryce Underwood Holds The Ladder To Michigan's Ceiling

BY JOHN BORTON

Football teams can feature a solid defense, good rushing attack, and better-than-average special teams. Without an excellent quarterback, though, they'll almost never reach elite status in any given season.

That's the blessing and the burden placed on sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood. Michigan's first campaign under new head coach Kyle Whittingham and staff is hurtling down the line like a freight train. If Underwood can push past his freshman struggles, acclimate to a new offense and exercise his immense physical skills to the maximum, the Wolverines could become a major force in the Big Ten once again.

Underwood knows what's at stake. He's no big talker, when it comes to the media. He wants to be a *doer*,

Last season, Underwood completed 60.3 percent of his passes as U-M's starting quarterback, going 202-for-335 for 2,428 yards with 11 touchdowns and 9 interceptions.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

and let the potential for Michigan's offense this season fill the headlines, rather than empty words.

"It's very high," Underwood insists, regarding U-M's capabilities on offense. "There is no limit."

If the offense rests in a lockbox following spring football, noted former Michigan All-American and captain Jon Jansen, Underwood surely holds the key.

Jansen, who provides color commentary on Michigan football radio broadcasts, knows a little something about great quarterbacks. He played on the undefeated, national champion 1997 squad with Brian Griese, who went on to the NFL. He also played with Tom Brady, who took some hard knocks at Michigan while going on to become the greatest quarterback in the history of pro football.

Jansen insists the ceiling for Michigan this year involves the College Football Playoff. Underwood, he pointed out, can give the Wolverines the boost they need to reach that ceiling.

ics. Where are your eyes going? What are you thinking? What are you doing?"

Underwood put in an underwhelming passing performance in very limited action in the spring game. Whittingham waved that off, given the split squads and intentional lack of snaps to preserve health. Still, what's football anticipation without fretting? Some onlookers threw that aspect into overdrive.

Jansen noted Underwood can quiet any bad buzz with a summer that sets up Michigan opponents for a tumbling fall.

"That's got to take 100 percent of his attention right now," Jansen said of Underwood's mechanics. "We always default, in pressure situations, to what is our mean? What are our habits? His mechanics, his footwork, have to become habitual. He's still working on it, but they have to be honed in on by the start of camp.

"Once you get into camp, it reverts back to the offense — installing the offense, executing the offense. The mechanics take the back seat at that point, and you should be refining. But now is the time for him. It's the longest time he has to be working on his mechanics. You've got to zero in on that. If he does, this team has a better chance of reaching that ceiling."

11 touchdowns and 9 interceptions. He racked up 2,428 yards through the air, and guided a team that won nine games.

But everyone remembers the setbacks, and in three of U-M's four losses — to Oklahoma, Ohio State and Texas — the freshman completed 47.6 percent of his throws, averaging 134.7 yards passing. He threw twice as many interceptions (4) as TD passes (2) against those opponents.

With at least four serious College Football Playoff contenders on this year's slate — Oklahoma, Indiana, Oregon and Ohio State — the entire team needs to ramp it up against top competition. But as always, the QB draws the most praise or the most heat, depending on the result.

"I got my feet wet, being a freshman and starting at the University of Michigan, with great teams all around," Underwood said, reflecting on Year 1. "Just learning how to manage the game, how to be comfortable and just learning how to be myself on the field — those were the biggest things.

"Of course, it's tough overall, just being a freshman at the University of Michigan. There's outside criticism. That's probably one of the toughest things. How to see through it is one of the things I picked up fast."

From his parents, to his friends, to teammates, Underwood got the support to stay grounded, regardless of the constant hum on social media and the immensity of the stage itself.

"It's just remembering who I am as a person," he said. "People can't really dictate how I feel, playing a game. It's about remembering who I am. It's also watching what you did, remembering the mistakes you made, learning to move forward from them. That's really the mindset I had all season."

Whittingham and his new coaches — especially offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Jason Beck, along with dedicated QB guru Koy Detmer

"We've got a really good, much better, clearer picture through spring ball — what he does well, what suits him, what aspects of the offense are strong suits, and we'll start to gravitate towards that as we move closer to the season."

HEAD COACH KYLE WHITTINGHAM ON UNDERWOOD

"He'll be well protected," Jansen assured. "I believe that. He'll have plenty of weapons to throw the ball to. I believe that. This is where it's, 'Can this team reach that ceiling of making the College Football Playoff?' It's going to depend mostly on what Bryce does between now and fall camp. Drinking through a firehose with mechanics and technique, also putting in a new offense. Taking on the expectations of being a spring captain.

"That's a lot. That's a *lot*. You're taking all that in leading up to spring ball. Spring ball was more about how are you going to manage the offense? How are you going to learn the offense? How are you going to execute the offense? From now until the start of fall camp, you're still working on that. But that takes a back seat to, all right, let's hone in on your footwork. Let's hone in on your throwing mechan-

Freshman Highs And Lows

Underwood couldn't have entered his rookie season under a brighter spotlight. The highest-rated prep quarterback in the land, a hefty NIL deal, and taking over the most-scrutinized position in Michigan athletics. Throw in the biggest college football crowd anywhere on any given Saturday, and you've got the makings of a fishbowl surrounded by 110,000 vehicles, all with their brights on.

The rookie certainly didn't wilt under the glare. He completed 60.3 percent of his passes, going 202-for-335 with

Michigan's storied football program has featured only four quarterbacks starting full-time as true freshmen, including Bryce Underwood last fall. The other three to do so were Rick Leach (1975), Chad Henne (2004) and Tate Forcier (2009).

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Jr. — have studied all the 2025 video. They've seen Underwood's every play from last year and seen him in live action now. They're tweaking his mechanics, instructing him on how to operate within Beck's offense and creating the habits to fall back on that Jansen referenced.

The head coach put in perspective where Underwood stands, on "The Blue Print" podcast, featuring former Michigan tight end Jake Butt and former Wolverine quarterback Devin Gardner.

"First of all, Bryce was thrown into a pretty tough situation last year," Whittingham said. "True freshman, 18 years old, starting quarterback at not only a P4 program, but Michigan. I mean, you're under the spotlight.

"Also, he didn't have a dedicated quarterback coach last year, from what I was told. And so, he was a little rough around the edges — still is, a little bit. But we had … you talk about spring ball, but long before that — January, February, we're in the film room and talking him through mechanics and footwork and read progressions and all that, continued through spring. He has made progress. Still got a long ways to go, but he's on the right path."

He's not just strolling along that path, either, Whittingham assured.

"One thing about Bryce," the head coach stressed. "He's got a great work ethic, and there's no worrying about him putting in the time. He's going to put in all the time he needs. And he's completely dedicated to his craft. So, we're still finding out. We've got a really good, much better, clearer picture through spring ball — what he does well, what suits him, what aspects of the offense are strong suits, and we'll start to gravitate towards that as we move closer to the season."

Getting To Know You

Word of Underwood's meeting with Whittingham during the bowl period quickly got out, in a positive light. But Underwood says there really wasn't much danger of him moving in another direction, despite the coaching change.

"Not in my mind," he said. "Because I

built a brotherhood here, and I told those guys that we would finish here, no matter what."

Investing time around his new mentors only confirmed that commitment.

"It's been amazing, spending time with each other outside of football," Underwood said. "Seeing who we are as people, trying to bring it all together as one.

"They want me to just use everything God gifted me with — my leadership skills, my ability, my talents."

He'll enjoy upgraded and more experienced receivers this season, with record-setting sophomore Andrew Marsh and Utah-import sophomore JJ Buchanan leading the way, along with a host of others, including some explosive freshmen such as another Utah import, Salesi Moa.

"I'm just excited to see what those guys have got," Underwood said. "Salesi ... yeah. We've got some great talent coming in. Definitely, it gets me excited."

The previous regime wanted to limit Underwood's rushing, so as to shield him from injury. Some of the talk coming from those who have watched practice involves a quarterback turned loose to a greater degree this year.

"I enjoy every part of the game that helps my team win," Underwood said. "My team being successful is my main mindset. Whatever I need to get to for my team, that's what I'm willing to do. No matter if it's taking a big hit, avoiding a bit hit. That's what I'll do."

Fellow spring captain and junior running back Jordan Marshall knows the role this Michigan offense can play in getting the Wolverines where they all hope to be. He sees Underwood as a vital weapon, one that won't stop pushing until he fully breaks through.

"He's going to be better," Marshall guaranteed of his backfield mate. "I'm still going to say he's going to win the Heisman someday. I still hold that to be true. He's getting coached hard. They're demanding the best out of him. I'm demanding the best out of him. His teammates are, and that's how it should be. He should demand the best out of me. I'm really excited to see the growth, and for everybody to see that growth that he's made.

"He's playing with a chip on his shoulder. The concepts fit how we want to play. We want to play fast, we want to play physical, but we also want to air the ball out a little more. We want to let 19 be dynamic and really show who he is. It fits him amazingly, and I'm excited to see what he does with the receivers and everybody on the offense in this new system."

Marshall also shares with Underwood a burning desire to see Michigan rise from recent indignities to power status.

"Bryce is a leader," Marshall insisted. "That's how he is. It's a reason we all wanted to come back and make this place better. We want to put Michigan back at the top. Bryce being an in-state kid, knowing how much Michigan means to him and his family ... he loves this place. He truly does. I love this place, and we just want to see this place be the best.

"He's demanding of *himself* to be the best. Sometimes he puts too much pressure on himself, but it's the expectation you have to have at this university. We have to have the expectation to win every game against our rivals, beat the Big Ten and win the natty. That's always going to be our expectations here. Nothing less than that. Every single game, there's not an excuse. That's the pressure you want to have. For him, he's attacking that every single day.

"He puts stuff on himself all the time, and I'm like, 'We've all got to be better. You can't just put it on yourself.' It's really exciting the accountability he's had on himself, the leadership he's taken, being more vocal, talking to receivers after the play, talking to me after plays. What did I think about this? It's that willingness to take feedback from the players and the coaches as well. We're truly all aligned and coming together to be better."

How much better?

"We'll be much more explosive," Underwood quietly assured. "And we'll come out way faster." ❑

The Jump From Freshman To Sophomore

Michigan has featured four quarterbacks starting full-time as true freshmen, including Bryce Underwood. Here is a look at the jump the first three made from their rookie season to their sophomore campaign.

Rick Leach, 1975 — Leach guided Michigan to an 8-2-2 record as a true freshman. He went 32-for-100 passing, 32.0 percent, for 680 yards, 3 touchdowns and 12 interceptions. Running an option offense, he also ran for 552 yards, averaging 4.9 yards per carry with 5 rushing touchdowns. That year, the Wolverines tied Stanford (19-19) and Baylor (14-14) at home in the nonconference campaign. They then won seven straight, but fell to Ohio State at home, 21-14, with Leach throwing crucial interceptions late in that contest. They then lost to Oklahoma in the Orange Bowl, 14-6.

The following year, Leach guided the Wolverines to a 10-2 record and a tie with Ohio State for the Big Ten championship. He went 50-for-105 passing (48.0 percent) with 13 touchdowns and 8 interceptions. He also rushed for 638 yards on 114 tries, averaging 6.0 yards per run. The Wolverines won their first eight games that season, outscoring foes, 353-58. They dropped a heartbreaker at Purdue, 16-14, but finished the regular season with two more victories, beating Ohio State in Columbus, 22-0.

Chad Henne, 2004 — Henne guided Michigan to a Big Ten championship in 2004, the only freshman quarterback in U-M history ever to do so. The Wolverines went 9-3, 7-1 in the Big Ten which tied Iowa for first. Henne threw for 2,743 yards, going 240-for-399 (60.2 percent) with 25 touchdowns and 12 interceptions. The Wolverines lost to Notre Dame early that season, then dropped the final two, at Ohio State (37-21) and to Texas in a Rose Bowl shootout classic, 38-37.

As a sophomore, Henne's numbers went down slightly for a banged-up Michigan team that went 7-5. Henne threw for 2,526 yards on 223-for-382 passing (58.4 percent) with 23 touchdowns and 8 interceptions.

Tate Forcier, 2009 — Forcier led a 5-7 Michigan squad in 2009. He started all 12 games at quarterback, completing 165 of 281 passes (58.7 percent) for 2,050 yards and 13 touchdowns and 10 interceptions. As a sophomore, Forcier gave way to Denard Robinson as the team's primary quarterback. Forcier played in eight games, going 54-for-84 (64.3 percent) passing for 597 yards, with 4 touchdowns and 4 interceptions. He transferred out after the 2010 season, given Robinson's takeover at the helm of a 7-6 football team.

— John Borton

FROSH NO MORE

Bryce Underwood Leads A Thin Crew Of QBs

BY JOHN BORTON

The Michigan quarterbacks room wasn't crowded in spring practice, despite legacies from both Michigan and Ohio State on hand. The focus right now — a second-year starter looking to make a leap, personally and team-wise.

Sophomore Bryce Underwood logged a freshman season many rookie quarterbacks could only dream about. He completed 60.3 percent of his passes (202-for-335), threw for 2,428 yards, firing 11 touchdown tosses. He also guided the Wolverines to nine wins, before off-field chaos changed Michigan's future dramatically, bringing Kyle Whittingham to Ann Arbor after two decades in Utah.

For Underwood, it meant an abrupt shift of gears — new head coach, new offensive coordinator in Jason Beck and a dedicated quarterbacks coach in Koy Detmer Jr. It also forced a decision, albeit a quick one. The Michigan signal-caller let everyone know he planned to stay put.

"It was a blessing, just how fast we were able to get the ball rolling for the next year," Underwood said. "Mindset switched, mindset changed and everything. It's been a blessing to have Coach Whitt here. He's pushing us, and pushing me, to be the best we can possibly be. Overall, I was going to stay home, no matter what."

Underwood's usage in the spring game proved a testament both to how solidly he's Michigan's QB1, as well as the care being taken to not getting him nicked up. The sophomore played sparingly, operating in the first quarter of U-M's Maize and Blue scrimmage. While those positionally teetering on the edge of panic by nature fretted about his brief appearance (3-for-9 passing for 22 yards), his head coach certainly wasn't one of them.

"He progressed all through spring," Whittingham said afterwards. "Some things may not be noticeable to the general populous. His footwork, his pocket presence ... he's improved in all areas. Now, he still has work to do. He knows that, we know that. But I think he's ahead of where he was, certainly, from last season. We think he's got a big upside and still have a lot of confidence in him. There's no different sentiment than what we had when we first got here."

Whittingham also made sure everyone knew that a heartening effort by freshman QB Tommy Carr in the spring scrimmage (21-for-30 passing for 143 yards, along with 6 scrambles for an additional 51 yards) wasn't about to change the pecking order.

"Bryce is our starter right now, and that's not any different after today," Whittingham said. "But Tommy has really made strides. He just really has a great pocket presence and escapability. He can extend plays and keeps his eyes downfield.

"All the things that you look for in a big-time quarterback, I believe Tommy possesses those. It's still early in his career, but what he's doing out there relative to his experience level is pretty impressive."

Carr, the grandson of former Michigan head coach Lloyd Carr, established himself in the spring as QB2, while sophomore Chase Herbstreit — the son of ESPN analyst and former Buckeyes quarterback Kirk Herbstreit — settled in at No. 3. Barring anything unforeseen, Michigan will ride into the 2026 season on Sept. 5 against Western Michigan with its fortunes riding on the strong arm and ready legs of No. 19.

The Wolverines will feature experienced depth, though, thanks to former Colorado State quarterback Brayden

Working with offensive coordinator Jason Beck and a dedicated quarterbacks coach in Koy Detmer Jr., Underwood put in the extra work this offseason and is preparing to make a leap forward in Year 2 as a starter.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

X-FACTOR

Belleville (Mich.) High product **BRYCE UNDERWOOD** is a multi-dimensional quarterback who will be deployed more as a rushing threat this season. Last year, Underwood ranked third in the Big Ten among non-running backs with 6.7 yards per rush attempt (excluding sacks).

Fowler-Nicolosi coming to Ann Arbor via the transfer portal. Fowler redshirted this past year, appearing in three games. The previous two seasons, he started for the Rams. Over the course of four years, he threw for 6,938 yards and 38 touchdowns, with 29 interceptions, connecting on 60.2 percent of his passes.

Detmer On Development

Underwood will face a schedule that appears even tougher than last year's. The slate features home showdowns with Oklahoma, Iowa, Penn State and defending national champion Indiana, along with road trips to Oregon and Ohio State (with a trap game against UCLA sandwiched between those two). Underwood will certainly not lack chances to improve his big-game performances from last season, including a 9-completion effort in a loss at Oklahoma, 8 completions for 63 yards in the home loss to Ohio State and 3 interceptions in a Citrus Bowl defeat at the hands of Texas.

Whittingham's staff will look for first-year breakthroughs in some of the prominent games on the '26 docket, and that means making Michigan's overall offensive performance against strong defenses much better. It also means channeling Underwood's natural talents into solid showdown numbers, with the help of a strong rushing attack and an upgraded corps of receivers.

Detmer came to quickly appreciate Underwood's upside, discussing it in an "In The Trenches" podcast hosted by former Michigan captain Jon Jansen.

"Bryce holds himself to such a high standard, and he has big goals for himself," Detmer commented. "And what I love about Bryce is the kid works his tail off. A lot of players have high expectations and high goals for themselves, but maybe their actions and what they do on a day-to-day basis don't align. Bryce shows that every single day.

"Bryce wants to be a great player, and he works his tail off, both in the film study and then in the weight room. He's working really hard. For him, this spring, it's just sharpening up his toolbox, whether it be with his feet or timing on certain throws and things like that. We're spending the little bit of time we get now to work one-on-one with him after and before weights. The kid is super, super driven, and I'm thankful to be able to work with him."

The work remains essential for all of Michigan's quarterbacks, Detmer stressed. He's seen what's there through the spring, and each of the QBs knows what needs to get done through the offseason, heading into fall camp.

"You've got to put in the extra time," Detmer said. "You've got to put in the extra work. You have to find more time than what is asked of you to do extra study and extra film study, extra training in the weight room, extra training with your guys on your team that you're going to play with in the fall.

"You've got to be the toughest individual on the team. When teammates see you getting hit on the field and you're popping right back up, that says a lot.

"Being the toughest both physically and mentally is important and is a non-negotiable for us in the quarterback room. Every single day when you walk into that weight room, you're giving everything you've got not just for yourself but for every single guy in that room. Those are some non-negotiable habits that I try to instill in our guys."

QUARTERBACKS

14	Tommy Carr (6-4, 185), Fr.
—	Brayden Fowler-Nicolosi (6-2, 200), Gr.
15	Chase Herbstreit (6-1, 198), So.
17	Brady Smigiel (6-5, 215), Fr.
19	Bryce Underwood (6-4, 228), So.

Michigan Passing Game In Last Five Seasons

Season	Passing Yds./G	Big Ten Rank	National Rank
2025	186.8	14th	107th
2024	129.1	18th	131st
2023	213.7	6th	82nd
2022	219.9	7th	83rd
2021	228.7	7th	68th

[FYI]

- Offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach **Jason Beck** worked with signal-caller Devon Dampier each of the last two seasons at New Mexico in 2024 and Utah in 2025. Dampier became the first-ever New Mexico quarterback to be named first-team All-Mountain West, putting up a conference-best 3,934 yards of total offense, including 2,768 passing. Last season, the 5-foot-11, 210-pounder was recognized as the Big 12 Offensive Newcomer of the Year and third-team all-conference, standing as one of five FBS quarterbacks with 2,400-plus passing yards and 800-plus rushing yards.
- Last season, **Bryce Underwood** passed for 2,428 yards, the second-most by a Michigan freshman in program history behind only Chad Henne. In 2004, Henne completed 60.2 percent of his passes for 2,743 yards and 25 touchdowns with 12 interceptions. There have been two other freshman starting quarterbacks at Michigan — Tate Forcier (2,050 passing yards, 13 TD, 10 INT in 2009) and Rick Leach (680 passing yards, 3 TD, 12 INT in 1975).
- **Underwood** rushed for 392 yards last season — the most by a Michigan quarterback since Devin Gardner posted 483 rushing yards in 2013. Underwood notched 88 carries, averaging 4.5 yards per attempt, and totaled 6 touchdowns.
- One of the most experienced signal-callers the Maize and Blue have had in recent years, **Brayden Fowler-Nicolosi** spent the last four seasons at Colorado State, where he racked up 6,938 passing yards, 38 TD and 29 INT. He has more career passing yards than any Michigan player to take a snap for the Wolverines since Shea Patterson in 2019. His 28 career starts, meanwhile, are the same amount as J.J. McCarthy had in three seasons of college football.

QUICK FACTS

Position Coach: Jason Beck (1st year at U-M)

Returning Starter: Bryce Underwood (13 career starts)

Departing Starters: None

Projected New Starters: None

Top Reserves: Tommy Carr, Brayden Fowler-Nicolosi (28, at Colorado State)

Newcomers: Carr, Brady Smigiel

Moved In: Fowler-Nicolosi

Moved Out: Jadyn Davis (East Tennessee State), Mikey Keene (Arizona State), Davis Warren (Stanford)

Rookie Impact: None

Most Improved Player: Underwood

Best Pro Prospect: Underwood

Carr Is Running Just Fine

Carr's spring game effort wasn't a one-hit wonder, by any means. Whittingham began speaking highly of him in the early part of spring practice, noting he'd earned the No. 2 slot among Michigan quarterbacks.

The Saline High graduate threw for 5,247 yards and 64 touchdowns in two seasons as that school's starting quarterback, succeeding older brother CJ Carr, now the starting quarterback at Notre Dame. In addition to having the U-M connection through Lloyd Carr, the freshman is also the grandson of Michigan two-time All-American Tom Curtis and the son of Jason Carr, a Michigan quarterback from 1992-95. So, the young Carr's poise in this setting isn't any shocker.

"Tommy Carr is doing a nice job. ... Tommy has looked like he's got a good skill set," Whittingham commented in his first spring meeting with the press."

Asked in a subsequent press conference about Michigan players making the biggest strides this spring, Carr's name rolled off Whittingham's lips first.

"I would say Tommy Carr has been a pleasant surprise for us," Whittingham said. "He's really progressed throughout spring. And emerged as, at least for right now, the No. 2 guy. There'll be more competition going forward in fall camp. But if we had to play tomorrow, he'd be the No. 2 guy."

Herbstreit threw for 3,982 yards and 32 touchdowns in 33 prep games with St. Xavier High in Cincinnati, but did not make an appearance in a Michigan game last year. Like all the other freshmen coming in for the 2025 season, he needed to quickly shift gears when the new coaching staff came on at the end of the season. For Michigan's 2025 Scout Team Player of the Year on offense, the change has been a positive, via Whittingham.

"What I've noticed is he's trying to bring that old-school Michigan, just hard football, back into the culture," Herbstreit told Champ Media's "The Team." "And I feel like he's doing a pretty good job. He wants the team to be player-led. He wants the players to lead stuff and not the coaches.

"And I think when you have players leading the team, you'll be more successful than coaches trying to drag you out and do work that you don't want to.

Carr, a freshman whose Michigan bloodlines are impeccable, passed for 5,247 yards and 64 touchdowns in two seasons as the starter at nearby Saline (Mich.) High.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

"I definitely want a team bond. I feel like last year, we were a pretty good team, but there were definitely moments where guys could be kind of selfish and more about themselves. Coach Whitt's doing a better job of making it team, team, team for sure."

This team will add Brady Smigiel, from Newbury Park High in Thousand Oaks, Calif., to the freshman crew this year as well. The four-year starter threw for 13,695 yards and 162 touchdowns for his prep squad, accounting for 185 TDs overall. But, on Sept. 5, all eyes from a crowd of more than 110,000 will be trained on No. 19, to see the first steps of a hoped-for leap by the Wolverines.

"Bryce's ceiling ... it's tough to measure," Whittingham said. "It's up there. It's way up there. He was thrust into a starting role last year. He had just barely turned 18 years old when he was the starting quarterback at a big-time Power Four school. I thought he performed pretty good, given the circumstances. There's some things he needs to refine in his game. He knows that, and we've been working on it.

"He's got two real dedicated quarterback coaches, Koy Detmer, who does nothing but spend time with the quarterback and coach him. And then Jason Beck is a masterful quarterback coach as well. He supplements what Koy's doing. And we're seeing progress.

"If Bryce can get everything smoothed out and get the deficiencies that he had fixed, the sky's the limit for that young man." ❑

PRESEASON ANALYSIS

STARTER ★★★½

Sophomore Bryce Underwood features all the physical tools — strong arm, rugged stature, and the ability to run. He delivered plenty as a true freshman starter, completing more than 60 percent of his passes and helping the Wolverines win nine games. He struggled more against Michigan's toughest opponents (not surprisingly), and this year's schedule is packed with College Football Playoff possibles. With a new staff and dedicated quarterbacks coach, he's looking to take a big step forward against the fiercest competition, and could well be called upon to use his legs as an even greater weapon in offensive coordinator Jason Beck's scheme.

DEPTH ★★★

Michigan featured no experienced depth in its spring game this year, but that's about to change. Brayden Fowler-Nicolosi, with nearly 7,000 passing yards at Colorado State, joins the team this summer. Meanwhile, early entry true freshman Tommy Carr looked impressive in the spring game, and sophomore Chase Herbstreit returns for a second season in maize and blue. Freshman Brady Smigiel will also add depth to the QB room while continuing to recover from an ACL tear that ended his senior prep season last fall. So, there's talent, but beyond Fowler-Nicolosi, it's untested at this level.

OVERALL ★★★½

Several observers note the continued development of Underwood between now and September holds the key to making Michigan go this season. He's in good hands with Beck and QB coach Koy Detmer Jr., but Oklahoma, Indiana, Oregon, Ohio State and others will provide the true test.

POSITION COACH

Offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach **Jason Beck** is entering his first season at Michigan, after spending last year under head coach Kyle Whittingham at Utah. Beck is heading into his fourth year as an FBS coordinator, with previous stops at Syracuse (2023), New Mexico (2024) and with the Utes (2025).

Last season, Utah ranked second nationally in rushing offense (266.3 yards per game), fourth in total offense (482.9), fifth in scoring offense (41.2 points per game) and 82nd in passing offense (216.6 yards a contest).

Two Utah offensive players were picked in the first round of the 2026 NFL Draft, with offensive tackles Spencer Fano (No. 9, Cleveland Browns) and Caleb Lomu (No. 28, New England Patriots), the 11th and 12th Utes in program history to become opening-round selections.

Quarterback Devon Dampier was named Big 12 Offensive Newcomer of the Year in 2025, after following Beck from New Mexico, where he finished No. 2 in the Mountain West with 2,768 total passing yards in 2024. The Lobos led the Mountain West in total offense (484.3 yards per game) in Beck's one season as the OC.

A former quarterback at Ventura College (2002), College of the Canyons (2003) and BYU (2004-06), Beck got his coaching start as an intern at BYU (2007) and LSU (2008). He coached quarterbacks at Weber State (2009-11), Simon Fraser (2012; also offensive coordinator), BYU (2013-15), Virginia (2016-21) and Syracuse (2022) before becoming an FBS coordinator.

RETURNING PLAYERS

CHASE HERBSTREIT
So. • Cincinnati
Ht.: 6-1 • Wt.: 198

- Redshirted with no game appearances in 2025.
- Earned Co-Scout Team Player of the Year honors on offense as a freshman.
- Three-year starter at quarterback for St. Xavier, leading the Bombers to a 20-13 record in games that he played.
- Career totals of 3,983 yards passing and 32 touchdowns with 14 interceptions in 33 games as a starter, in addition to 657 rushing yards and 9 touchdowns.
- Son of ESPN and Amazon football analyst Kirk Herbstreit, who was a four-year letterwinner at Ohio State (1989-93). His mother, Alison, was an OSU cheerleader.
- Brothers, Tye and Jake, played football at Clemson; other brother, Zak, was a walk-on tight end at Ohio State and now works in media for On3.
- No. 133 quarterback in the country and No. 100 player in Ohio, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

BRYCE UNDERWOOD
So. • Detroit
Ht.: 6-4 • Wt.: 228

- Started all 13 games as a freshman in 2025, completing 60.3 percent of his passes (202-of-335) for 2,428 yards and 11 touchdowns with 9 interceptions.
- Added 88 rushes for 392 yards and 6 scores, including taking 20 sacks.
- No. 1 overall recruit in 2025 class, per Rivals Industry Ranking.
- Second No. 1 prospect to sign with U-M in modern era, joining DL Rashan Gary (2016).
- Four-year starter for Belleville (Mich.) High, amassing a 50-4 record in his career with two Division I state championships (2021-22), led the Tigers to an undefeated season in 2022.
- Recorded 12,919 all-purpose yards in career, including 11,488 passing yards, and 179 total touchdowns (152 passing) as a starter.
- Threw for 2,509 yards with 32 touchdowns and 6 interceptions during his senior season, completing 71.8 percent of his passes, also rushed for over 600 yards with 6 touchdowns.
- Two-time Gatorade Michigan Player of the Year (2023, '24).
- Michigan Associated Press Division 1-2 Player of the Year in 2021.

Year	GP/GS	Comp.	Att.	Yards	TD	INT
2025	13/13	202	335	2,428	11	9

NEWCOMERS

TOMMY CARR
Fr. • Saline, Mich.
Ht.: 6-4 • Wt.: 185

- Enrolled early in January and stood out in the 2026 spring game, going 21-of-30 passing for 143 yards and rushing 10 times for 67 yards while seeing action for both the Maize and Blue squads.
- Father, Jason Carr, was a quarterback at Michigan from 1992-95, and his older brother, CJ Carr, is a redshirt sophomore signal-caller for Notre Dame.
- Paternal grandfather is Lloyd Carr, the former Michigan head coach from 1995-2007 who led U-M to the 1997 national championship.
- Maternal grandfather is Tom Curtis, a former U-M safety (1966-69) and All-American.
- 2024 MLive Offensive Player of the Year and Associated Press All-State selection.
- Michigan Coaches Association All-State pick in 2025.
- Across two seasons as the starter at Saline (Mich.) High, Carr totaled 5,247 yards on 357-of-514 passing (69.5 percent) with 64 touchdowns and 9 interceptions; rushed for 589 yards and 14 touchdowns.
- Rated a four-star recruit and the nation's No. 19 quarterback by Rivals.

BRAYDEN FOWLER-NICOLOSI
Gr. • Aledo, Texas
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 200

- Spent four seasons at Colorado State, where he appeared in 31 games with 28 starts, completing 583 of his 969 pass attempts (60.2 percent) for 6,938 yards and 38 touchdowns with 29 picks.
- Opened the first three games last year before being benched and deciding to move on from the Rams program. He connected on 44 of his 82 passes for 488 yards and 1 score with 2 interceptions.
- Posted a 60.5 percent completion rate with 2,796 yards, 14 touchdowns and 9 picks in 2024, also rushing for 4 scores.
- Completed 62.1 percent of his throws for 3,460 yards and 22 touchdowns with 16 interceptions in 2023. He was named honorable mention All-Mountain West.
- As a true freshman in 2022, Fowler-Nicolosi competed in three games after enrolling early the prior winter. He went 17-of-37 passing for 194 yards and 2 touchdowns with 1 interception.
- A three-star recruit in the 2022 class, he attended Aledo (Texas) High and was the No. 62 quarterback in the nation per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Comp.	Att.	Yards	TD	INT
2022*	3/1	17	37	194	1	2
2023*	12/11	292	470	3,460	22	16
2024*	13/13	230	380	2,796	14	9
2025*	3/3	44	82	488	1	2
Totals	**31/28**	**583**	**969**	**6,938**	**38**	**29**

**at Colorado State*

BRADY SMIGIEL
Fr. • Thousand Oaks, Calif.
Ht.: 6-5 • Wt.: 215

- Enrolled early this winter and will redshirt while rehabbing a high school knee injury.
- 2024 Los Angeles Times Player of the Year and the Cal-Hi Sports Mr. Football Award winner.
- A four-year starter with 13,695 total yards (12,846 passing) and 185 TDs (162 passing).
- In six games as a senior, he completed 64.4 percent of his passes for 1,624 yards and 15 TDs, adding 171 rushing yards and 5 TDs.
- As a junior, he threw for 3,521 yards and 49 TDs with 3 interceptions; also racked up 435 rushing yards with 11 touchdowns.
- A three-star prospect, Smigiel slotted as the No. 438 overall player and No. 28 quarterback in the 2026 class, per Rivals Industry.

New Sheriff, Same Marshall

Jordan Marshall Knows He's Where He Belongs

BY JOHN BORTON

Jordan Marshall faced a choice, like all of his returning teammates. Stay put amid a near wholesale change in Michigan's coaching leadership, or go see what's out there.

In the end, the rising junior running back knew. When it came time for the M Club banner to be touched again, he'd be leaping as high as anyone.

"The more I thought about it, I have such love for this place," Marshall said. "It's not only a commitment that I made when I was a junior in high school, but the people I've met since I've been here is something that brought me back. This place is just amazing. With this NIL stuff and the money, you can go and get money anywhere else. But if you truly rely on the people and the place where you're at ... I truly love this place and didn't want to leave it."

He returned with a purpose, as well.

"I also came back to build something great here," Marshall stressed. "I know this place is great, and it's been great. For me, it just didn't sit right in my heart, not coming back here to fulfill that and make this place better. That's something I take seriously as a [spring/summer] captain, as a player on this team, bringing it back to this is a high culture, a highly valued place, a high performance not only in football, but how we treat each other, how we treat our families, how we treat the community. That's something I take pride in about this place — the alumni and all the connections.

"I didn't want to leave this place. I want to make this place the best it can be for future generations and leave my mark on the history here."

Not that he didn't have a time of pausing and reflecting. After all, the earthquake that hit Schembechler Hall last December — and the rumblings that preceded it — shook many. Marshall arrived at Michigan in the wake of a national championship. Now he and his teammates were staring down a rebuild with people whom he'd never met, and not knowing if anyone he knew and who knew him would be retained.

One important piece, for Marshall, did stay on. Tony Alford, the Michigan running backs coach on the previous staff, joined the incoming crew brought here

Marshall earned second-team All-Big Ten notice from conference coaches last season after rushing 150 times for 932 yards and 10 touchdowns.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

by coach Kyle Whittingham. To someone well established in the running backs room, that meant plenty.

"It's just hard," he reflected. "I was trying to figure out what was happening with Coach Alford. He's my guy, somebody that I rely on a lot. I was just kind of confused, a lot going on with my family, trying to figure it out. Coming back from an injury as well. Trying to just do well for me."

After he reached his maize and blue epiphany, Marshall set about getting to know the new lay of the land. He carried the football 150 times for 932 yards a year ago, with 10 touchdowns. Marshall also pulled in 9 receptions for an additional 92 yards, earning second-team All-Big Ten notice from conference coaches.

They weren't the coaches he concerned himself over, though. Soon enough, Marshall felt at ease with the change overall. Speaking with new offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Jason Beck, offensive line coach Jim Harding and Whittingham himself, the third-year Wolverine came away fired up for the season to come and what it could look like.

"It's been good, getting to know Coach Beck," Marshall said. "And our line coach, Coach Harding. Meeting with them, it was like, there's just something special about them. You can tell. They have *it*. You meet them and snap. It just happens. I got to meet Coach Whitt when we were down in Florida. I've had many conversations, getting to know them. Not only just football, but as men, and I'm like, I want to be around these people."

Weapons All Over

Those people like the idea of him in the backfield, as well. Whittingham spoke highly of Marshall all spring, and after the spring game, said this on "The Blue Print" podcast with former Wolverines Jake Butt and Devin Gardner.

"Jordan Marshall's RB1, make no mistake, coming out of spring ball," Whittingham assured. "He's a terrific player, a terrific leader. Can't say enough good things about him."

Not surprisingly, Marshall has good things to say about the offensive scheme Whittingham and Beck are bringing to Ann Arbor. It's not hard to see why, either.

Last year, Beck directed a Utah offense that finished second in the nation in rushing yards per game (266.3) and wound up fourth in total offense (482.9). The Utes were fifth nationally in scoring offense, piling up 41.2 points per contest. They posted the nation's third-best third-down conversion rate (52.6) and ran the 12th-best red zone offense in the country. Those sorts of numbers would bring more than a few denizens of The Big House to their feet.

"I'm very excited, and I think this offense is going to suit us well," Marshall said. "Not only me, but my teammates. It will give everybody a chance to make big plays. We have explosive players, not only at running back, but at the tight end, wide receiver and quarterback positions. It's going to be exciting to see all the things we've gained and all the things we've kept in our offense. It will be great to see us develop from spring to when we get into the camp and the season.

"I said it last year — we have scary weapons all over the field. I think we have more now. It's just, can we click? Can we all come together? We don't have to be perfect right now. Right now, it's all getting on the same page, adapting to each other, learning how each other plays. We have so many great leaders on that offensive side, guys that have played a lot of ball as young cats."

They feature an upgraded receiving corps over last year, and that alone will make Marshall's job easier, he noted.

"For me, I see [sophomore wideout] JJ [Buchanan] making a play, and I'm like, whew!" Marshall exclaimed. "I see young guys like [freshmen wideouts Jaylen] Pile and Travis [Johnson], [Salesi] Moa. Obviously, [sophomore receiver] Andrew Marsh is explosive, and [freshman running back] Savion [Hiter]. Seeing all these guys, it's exciting to see how far they come from the spring cycle on into camp. We have a great team, great coaches, and we're going to be put in position to win every single game.

"Andrew has done a great job of leading that receiver room. He's the leader in that room. He's a younger guy, but he's the leader in that room. He's been taking control and showing the practice habits. You practice how you play. I've learned that since I was a little kid. That's what we're striving for. You practice hard and we'll be fine in the games, and we're going to execute at a high level."

"I didn't want to leave this place. I want to make this place the best it can be for future generations and leave my mark on the history here."

MARSHALL

Much will fall on the shoulders of sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood, and Marshall intends to make things as easy as possible for the second-year Wolverine. They're both leaders on the offense and on the team, and both want to lead Michigan out of the gate quicker in games.

"We both are captains, but me and him trust each other immensely," Marshall said. "I trust him. Even if I see a hole sometimes and think, you should have handed the ball off, I know that he's doing what's best. I think that's great between us, but we have to make sure everybody is on the same page and everybody is straining through the play.

"The big thing is, we've got to start fast. We started a lot of games slow last year, and that falls on me and Bryce, getting that offense ready to go so it converts into games. That's what we've been stressing — we've got to start fast. Whatever time we hit the field, we've got to start fast. For me and Bryce, that's leadership. We have to be vocal. Sometimes you can get caught up in what you're doing, but we have to be vocal to get some of these younger guys ready."

Marshall noted that Beck is urging him to be at his best early and often.

"Coach Beck knows what I can do out on the field, but he wants to make sure that I am not complacent, and that I show that intensity every single day out on the field in practice, that same leadership," Marshall said. "That's my goal — every single day to be the same person. Come out there with a smile on my face and get this team to the position they need to be in."

A significant part of that job will involve getting Hiter ready to go. To a man, the Wolverines insisted the freshman tailback didn't look at all like a freshman in spring practice — physically, or in how he handled himself. Still, there's a lot to learn before the start of any Michigan football career, and Marshall insists he's ready to not only play, but play instructor.

Running back partner Justice Haynes did the same for Marshall a year ago. Now Marshall stands ready to pass along the valuable messages.

"It's definitely a wear and tear, but I

Beck Beckons Big Numbers For Backs

Jason Beck is relatively new to serving as an offensive coordinator, having done so at three different venues over the past three seasons. He's pretty good at it — just ask new Michigan head coach Kyle Whittingham.

Whittingham brought Beck in to run his offense at Utah, after Beck guided a powerful New Mexico offense a year earlier. Utah finished as one of the best offenses in the nation, with Michigan's new OC flipping the switches.

Running backs will love how those at their position have prospered under Beck.

At Utah last year, Beck oversaw the second-best rushing offense in the country. Leading rusher Wayshawn Parker didn't quite hit 1,000 yards (981), but that proved in part because quarterback Devon Dampier ran for 835 himself. Another QB, Byrd Ficklin, tacked on 513 rushing yards.

At New Mexico in 2024, the Lobos featured a 1,000-yard running back in Eli Sanders, with 1,063. That didn't lead the Lobos, since Dampier scampered for 1,166 yards and 19 touchdowns.

Beck took over as offensive coordinator at Syracuse in 2023, and dealt with an injury-riddled year. He still fielded a 1,000-yard rusher in running back LeQuint Allen Jr. (1,064), with QB Garrett Shrader adding 469 yards on the ground.

Michigan sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood rushed for 392 yards as a rookie, but he could bump up that total in 2026. That still leaves plenty of room for junior running back Jordan Marshall, rookie back Savion Hiter and others.

— John Borton

give Justice credit for helping me with that," Marshall said of a college football season, especially in the Big Ten. "Not only helping me balance the carries, but also showing me how to treat my body and how to prepare for games and get my body right. It's a different type of ball here in the Big Ten. Seeing how he prepared really helped me and made me realize I needed to prepare better. For me, every single day, it's treatment, hours, just trying to be the best I can for this team and making sure I can start every game and help lead this team to a national championship.

"It can be a lot. It's a physical game, and I love it. That's my favorite part of the game, being physical. Justice definitely helped me realize how to prepare my body and become better so I can play longer and be more efficient.

"That's something I'm trying to do, coaching [Hiter] to be the best player. Also, how to treat his body, and anything that ails or hurts you, take care of it right away. That's something you have to learn. This is a physical game, and it's going to take its toll, especially at the running back position. It's something I definitely want to teach him and make sure that he has in his arsenal, so when he's getting ready to play at the next level or whatever he wants to do, that he's able to do that at a high level."

Leading And Succeeding

Marshall takes the captain's mantle very seriously. He's embracing the present opportunity like he'd grip the football inside the 5-yard line.

"One thing that I love is that everybody is aligned, from recruiting, from coaching, from players, people coming in and out of this building," he assured. "That's what you want to see. Everybody is on that straight path and following the same road.

"It's been great. It's been good to see how much leadership, how much people trust not only in me, but in the other guys. It's important to have the leadership council but also captains. The leadership council is built from starters to guys that work their butts off at practice. That's a respect you have for guys on the team. It doesn't matter if you're a starter or if you're on the scout team. It matters how you treat everyone and how you prepare every single day to help this team win."

Marshall said he's excited about the high-octane offense Michigan's new coordinator Jason Beck has brought to the program.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

They're planning to win, all right. They won nine games last year, despite a simmering dysfunction that could have completely derailed some programs. That's all behind them now, and Marshall can't wait to see what lies ahead.

"I want to go win it all," he stressed. "That's why I came back here. That's the expectation here — beat all your rivals, win the Big Ten and win the natty. That will always be the expectation here. Nothing less. We shouldn't lose a game. That's the expectation here at the University of Michigan. If you think otherwise, you shouldn't be here. I truly think we have guys on this team that want to go win it all, and are willing to do whatever it takes to go win it all. We've got to keep coming together to do stuff for this university and put this university back on the map — competing at the highest level, and competing for the national championship every single year." ❑

NEW DYNAMIC IN THE DUO

Michigan Backs Feature A New Twist To The Attack

BY JOHN BORTON

Kyle Whittingham's early words about Michigan football delivered sweet music to the ears of classic Wolverine watchers, offensive linemen and those in the U-M backfield. He talked about toughness. He vowed Michigan will be physical, run the football and look to overpower opponents.

He praised the man whose statue greets anyone entering Michigan's football fortress.

So, while Whittingham will certainly add a host of new wrinkles to the offense — via offensive coordinator Jason Beck and others — the DNA appears very similar. His Utah squad finished second in the nation in running the football last year, averaging 266.3 yards per game, 6.02 yards per carry. Those numbers weren't an anomaly, either.

Whittingham didn't roll into Ann Arbor to find the cupboard bare, either. Michigan returns junior running back Jordan Marshall, who finished just shy of 1,000 yards to lead the team a year ago. The Wolverines retain senior Bryson Kuzdzal, who stepped in and impressed last season when injuries in the backfield began to pile up. Michigan's rushing attack will of course feature sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood, who can tuck it away and take off with the best of them. Those players and other veterans should put the Wolverines on track to match or better the 2,732 yards gained on the ground by the 2025 Wolverines.

But the biggest buzz in spring practice centered on a newcomer. Freshmen always get a little extra chatter, because of the allure of the unknown. Michigan will feature a rookie making himself known very rapidly in practice and soon on the field.

Former five-star recruit Savion Hiter looks nothing like a freshman, the Wolverines say, almost to a man. He's physically mature (6-0, 210), he can carry the ball with both physicality and elusiveness, he can catch out of the backfield or even split out. He carries himself like a veteran, to the point that insiders are already talking about two-back sets with Marshall.

Following the spring game (in which Hiter rushed for 44 yards on 10 carries, second only to fellow frosh QB Tommy Carr), Whittingham brought the rookie into the conversation without prompting.

"There were some real bright spots out there," Whittingham said. "I thought Savion Hiter really showed that he's an explosive back. He didn't get loose out in the open, but he's a powerful back that's going to be a big factor for us this fall."

Many echoed that message in the spring, building anticipation for what Beck will unleash come fall. The Wolverines did suffer a setback in the offensive backfield this spring, incurring the only major injury suffered. Junior running back Micah Ka'apana went down with a lower leg injury and has been ruled out for the 2026 season. Ka'apana would have provided experience and more depth at the position, but the Wolverines still look to be very strong heading into the summer

Jordan Marshall tied for a team-high 10 rushing touchdowns (with Justice Haynes) last season, including a career-best 3 TDs against Purdue.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

QUICK FACTS

Position Coach: Tony Alford (3rd year at U-M)
Returning Starter: None
Departing Starter: Justice Haynes (7 starts at U-M)
Projected New Starter: Jordan Marshall (5)
Top Reserves: Savion Hiter, Bryson Kuzdzal (2), Donovan Johnson
Newcomers: Jonathan Brown, Hiter
Moved In: None
Moved Out: Haynes (Georgia Tech), Jasper Parker (Arkansas)
Rookie Impact: Hiter
Most Improved Player: Marshall
Best Pro Prospect: Hiter

Marshall Leads The Way

Marshall remains the heart of the Michigan rushing attack, his 932 yards and 10 touchdowns on 150 carries (6.2 average) leading all U-M rushers and earning him second-team All-Big Ten honors by the me-

dia, third-team by conference coaches. He started four games and played in 11, hampered by injury later in the season.

He's more than ready to go this year, named a spring captain and fully on board with what Whittingham and Michigan's other coaches are bringing to The Big House come fall. That includes Beck's balanced approach to offense.

"It really plays to our strengths," Marshall said. "We ran the ball all of last year, but the fact that we can be 50-50 — we have receivers that can go get the ball, receivers that can make plays and make people miss — is exciting. ...

"It doesn't matter if I run the ball 20 times, five times. I want to run the ball, but whatever I can do to help this team win is what I want to do. It's exciting to see all the new concepts and all the new things we have installed, but also see things brought along from last year, things we're good at. He's so willing to make those changes and listen to our feedback."

Whittingham watched enough video of the Wolverines in 2025 to know exactly what he's getting from Marshall when it comes to running the football. He learned quickly how valuable the veteran will be in formulating the sort of team dynamic he desires. He credited the team with selecting the right spring captains, including No. 23.

"It became very apparent in a very short period of time that the team knew exactly what they were doing, and those guys were true leaders on the football team," Whittingham stressed. "Jordan Marshall's exceptional, great attitude, just sets a great example. And that's really what you're looking for. If you can get the top 10 percent of your team working harder than anybody else, everyone follows suit.

"And that's a very critical aspect of having an outstanding team — having that leadership show the way. The supreme function of a leader is to set the bar and then demand everyone live up to that level of play and that level of behavior."

Hiter hasn't appeared to be someone needing extensive lessons on football. The big back out of Louisa County (Va.) High — who rushed for 1,445 yards and 25 touchdowns as a senior — showed up looking like he knew just what he was doing. His demeanor impressed coaches and teammates as well.

"Savion Hiter, he's another bright spot," Whittingham noted. "We've talked about him several times during the course of spring. He's really a great fit for this offense. He has really impressed me with his blitz pickup. You have to be able to pass protect if you're a running back. That's part of the job description. For a true freshman, he is really doing a good job in that respect."

It doesn't stop there, though.

"When he showed up, you knew off the film, he has a lot of talent and a lot of ability," Beck said. "What I've been impressed with is just how hard he goes and competes — in everything, all the time. It's not a thing where you show up as a true freshman and you're trying to figure your way out. He's in there and he's going as hard as you can go. Whether he's right or he's wrong, he's just going.

"And that's a great skill set to have. You just go out there and compete, full speed. You can coach up and get better at everything, but that effort and intensity will allow him to have an impact. If that's a really strong position, and they're some of our best players, then let's get two backs on the field and play with both guys."

Kuzdzal appeared as if he might exit via the portal after the season, but remained in Ann Arbor, and that's a crucial keep for the Wolverines in terms of the depth of the backfield. He stepped in last season to rush 76 times for 326 yards and 4 touchdowns. When Marshall succumbed to injury in the cliffhanger with Northwestern at Wrigley Field, Kuzdzal stepped in to rush for 53 yards on 15 attempts, playing a key role in the game-winning touchdown drive. He started the following game at Maryland, going for 100 yards and 3 touchdowns on 20 carries.

The senior also played a major role in the bowl game against Texas, rushing 20 times for 82 yards. He brings a hard-driving style to an offense that appears a perfect fit for that sort of approach.

"He's a heck of a player, too, and Bryson is in that mix," Whittingham said. "We have those three top guys, and then some guys down below, jockeying for position to see who's going to be that fourth

900+ Yard Rushers Since 2010

Year	Player	Yards	TD
2025	Jordan Marshall	932	10
2024	Kalel Mullings	948	12
2023	Blake Corum	1,245	27
2022	Blake Corum	1,463	18
	Donovan Edwards	991	7
2021	Hassan Haskins	1,327	20
	Blake Corum	952	11
2018	Karan Higdon	1,178	10
2017	Karan Higdon	994	11
2012	Denard Robinson	1,266	7
2011	Denard Robinson	1,176	16
	Fitzgerald Toussaint	1,041	9
2010	Denard Robinson	1,702	14

RUNNING BACKS

29	Jonathan Brown (6-3, 200), Fr.
5	Savion Hiter (6-0, 210), Fr.
26	Donovan Johnson (6-0, 215), So.
25	Micah Ka'apana (5-11, 190), Jr.
24	Bryson Kuzdzal (5-11, 210), Sr.
23	Jordan Marshall (5-11, 216), Jr.

PRESEASON ANALYSIS

STARTERS ★★★★

This group presents as a major strong point for the Wolverines heading into the 2026 season. Jordan Marshall enters his junior season as a proven leader and effective back, falling just shy of 1,000 yards rushing last year. Freshman Savion Hiter gave Michigan coaches plenty to anticipate in the spring, the new staff commenting he looks very little like a rookie in the way he carries himself and attacks the game. Both Marshall and Hiter could see the field at the same time for the Wolverines, and will look to become one of the top 1-2 punches in the Big Ten.

DEPTH ★★★

The depth suffered a blow in the spring when junior Micah Ka'apana went down with a season-ending injury. But senior Bryson Kuzdzal filled in very effectively with more than 300 yards rushing last season, stepping up especially when Marshall suffered an injury. Sophomore Donovan Johnson and freshman Jonathan Brown will be on hand in the fall.

OVERALL ★★★★

This crew looks well stocked to enter Kyle Whittingham's first season as Michigan head coach. Whittingham loves an effective run game, and the Marshall-Hiter combo should be able to deliver it. The key will be staying healthy and finding a rhythm with both new OC Jason Beck's schemes and an emerging offensive line.

guy. Right now, we don't know that fourth, it was going to be Micah."

Ka'apana rushed 10 times for 38 yards last year. He had 20 yards on the ground along with an 8-yard reception against Texas. He figured to play a more prominent role this season, before going down.

"We'll miss him, and it's unfortunate, but so far we've been healthy other than that," Whittingham said. Junior walk-on Tomas O'Meara punched in the game-winning touchdown in the spring game, culminating a 9-carry, 29-yard effort. Meanwhile, sophomore Donovan Johnson, and freshman Jonathan Brown are all part of the depth battle.

Freshman Savion Hiter, the 2025 Gatorade Player of the Year in Virginia, turned heads during U-M's spring practice with his physical presence and maturity.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

In A Rush To Succeed

There's no question, Michigan hopes to upgrade its passing attack this season. From better protection to the natural steps Underwood should take from freshman to sophomore year — especially with a dedicated QB coach working with him — to an upgraded wide receiving corps and a greater capacity for throwing to their backs, the Wolverines will seek to be balanced on offense. There's also a determination in the tone of Whittingham and his coaches that would likely put a grin on the face of a long-time Schembechler Hall resident.

Asked by Michigan's Jon Jansen on the "In The Trenches" podcast what his fingerprints will look like on the Michigan program, Whittingham didn't hesitate to give a nod to a hard-edged past.

"I can tell you it's very similar to Coach [Bo] Schembechler," Whittingham said. "I've always been a fan of his growing up. I watched him very closely, read the book 'Bo's Lasting Lessons' by John Bacon. A lot of what we do culturally, our philosophies and beliefs, are right in line with Coach Schembechler. I'm going to say there are far more similarities than differences.

"This has been everything that I expected and hoped it would be. You see Michigan football on TV, and you hear about the tradition and the history. But to come here and firsthand be able to see for yourself, it's palpable. The history and the tradition here is thick, and I'm not here to change or tamper with that in any way, shape, or form. We're going to embrace it.

"Our job here is to try to make this football team and this program as good and as competitive as we possibly can. And so far, it's been great to work with these guys."

Dominant in the trenches, rugged defense, and an offense predicated on the ability to move people where they don't want to go and run over them. It's what beat Ohio State, when the Wolverines began taking down the Buckeyes with consistency again. It's what won for two decades for Whittingham in Utah. It's what he and his staff hope to showcase in Ann Arbor — sooner rather than later.

"You have to be able to run the ball, be physical and be able to attack teams that way," Beck assured. "Having said that, you also want to be able to throw it and be balanced, be dynamic. I've been a part of teams that really threw the ball at a high level. And then, like this last year, we're running it at a real high level and just throwing it efficiently enough.

"That will play out as the players and the personnel show what they're capable of and how we build this thing.

"There's no doubt it's always going to start with being physical, being able to run the ball. … You've got to be balanced enough and dynamic enough doing both, but you've got to be physical and be able to run the ball."

They possess the parts, and the will. Now it's all about getting it done. ❑

X-FACTOR

Freshman **SAVION HITER** has already ascended into possessing a prominent projected role alongside junior Jordan Marshall. Head coach Kyle Whittingham has described Hiter as a "six-foot ball of muscle" that is "the whole package." Expect him to play right away and soften the blow of losing 2025 starter Justice Haynes to the transfer portal.

[FYI]

- Showing how hard it was to bring **Jordan Marshall** down last season, the Cincinnati native ranked second in the Big Ten with 3.93 yards after contact per carry (minimum 100 attempts), per Pro Football Focus, behind only Ohio State's Bo Jackson (4.12). Marshall checked in eighth in the conference with 33 missed tackles forced, despite recording fewer rush attempts than six of the seven players ahead of him.
- While Michigan's offense lacked high-level, big-play ability overall, the run game produced quite a bit of explosiveness in 2025. The Maize and Blue ranked top 20 in the nation in runs of 20-plus (24; tied 20th), 30-plus (13; tied 13th), 40-plus (9; tied ninth) and 50-plus (8; tied first) yards. Marshall accounted for 8 of the Wolverines' 20-plus yard rushes, checking in tied for 45th nationally.
- Marshall's team-best 932 rushing yards last season are the most for a returning Michigan running back since Blake Corum went off for 1,463 yards in 2022 and returned to put up 1,245 in 2023.
- Michigan recorded 210.2 rushing yards per game last season, the fifth time in the last 10 seasons that the Wolverines have averaged more than 200 yards, joining the 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2022 campaigns. Prior to 2016, the last time Michigan accomplished the feat was 2011.
- According to the Rivals Industry Ranking, freshman **Savion Hiter** was the No. 12 overall player and No. 1 running back in the 2026 class, making him the highest-ranked Michigan signee at his position during the Rivals era (since 2004). The second-highest is Kevin Grady, who checked in No. 17 in 2005.

POSITION COACH

Tony Alford was hired in the spring of 2024, and is in his third season as running backs coach and run game coordinator after nine seasons at Ohio State, including the final two as assistant head coach for offense.

The Wolverines ranked No. 14 nationally with 210.2 rushing yards per game in 2025, led by two rushers that racked up 850-plus yards — Jordan Marshall (932) and Justice Haynes (879). U-M totaled 12 100-yard rushing performances by four players in 13 games, the most for the program since 1998.

Under his watch, Kalel Mullings experienced a breakout season in 2024, leading the team in rushes (185), yards (948) and touchdowns (12). Mullings was selected in the sixth round of the 2025 NFL Draft by the Tennessee Titans. Donovan Edwards also made the jump to the pros as an undrafted free agent with the New York Jets after posting 128 carries for 589 yards and 4 TDs as a senior.

With OSU, Alford mentored four RBs who produced six 1,000-yard seasons — Ezekiel Elliott (2015), Mike Weber (2016), J.K. Dobbins (2017-19) and TreVeyon Henderson (2021). Four of his Buckeye backs were drafted in the NFL, including three top-100 selections in Elliott (No. 4 overall), Dobbins (No. 55) and Trey Sermon (No. 88).

Previously, Alford coached at Notre Dame for six years from 2009-14, working with wide receivers for two seasons and running backs for four. The 30-year veteran also coached running backs at Louisville (2007-08), Iowa State (2002-06), Washington (2001), Iowa State (1997-2000), Kent State (1996) and Division III Mount Union (1995).

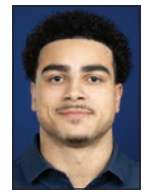
The Akron, Ohio, native attended Colorado Springs (Colo.) Doherty High and Colorado State University, where he was a four-year running back.

RETURNING PLAYERS

MICAH KA'APANA • RB
Jr. • Waianae, Hawai'i
Ht.: 5-11 • Wt.: 190

- Suffered a season-ending lower-body injury this spring.
- Dealt with injury much of the 2025 campaign, rushing 10 times for 38 yards and catching 1 pass for 8 yards in four games.
- Appeared in two games in 2024, rushed once for 4 yards.
- Named Scout Team Offensive Player of the Week in helping prep for Arkansas State.
- Helped Las Vegas Bishop Gorman win three straight Nevada Class 5A state championships from 2021-23 and the 2023 MaxPreps national title.
- Racked up 732 rushing yards and 9 touchdowns as a senior and rushed for 1,001 yards and 15 scores as a junior.
- Tabbed a three-star recruit and checked in as the No. 39 running back in the country and second-best player in Nevada.

Year	GP/GS	Att.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
2024	2/0	1	4	4.0	0
2025	4/0	10	38	3.8	0
Total	**6/0**	**11**	**42**	**3.8**	**0**



BRYSON KUZDZAL • RB
Sr. • Grand Rapids, Mich.
Ht.: 5-11 • Wt.: 210

- Appeared in nine games with two starts (Maryland, Texas) in 2025.
- Rushed 76 times for 326 yards and 4 touchdowns, with a 100-yard rushing performance in a win over Maryland.
- Former walk-on was the top rusher in the 2025 spring game (14 carries for 105 yards).
- Earned a scholarship after the 2024 season.
- Appeared in six games on special teams in 2024, making 2 tackles.
- Did not see game action in 2023.
- Attended Forest Hills Eastern High, rushing for 2,553 yards and 38 touchdowns during his junior and senior seasons.
- Also competed in basketball and track and field, and was part of a state runner-up Michigan Division 2 track and field team.
- Named all-state by The Detroit News after his senior season.

Year	GP/GS	Att.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
2023	0/0	0	0	0	0
2024	6/0	0	0	0	0
2025	9/2	76	326	4.3	4
Total	**15/2**	**76**	**326**	**4.3**	**4**

DONOVAN JOHNSON • RB
So. • Savannah, Ga.
Ht.: 6-0 • Wt.: 215

- Redshirted and did not see game action in 2025.
- Attended IMG Academy for his final three seasons.
- Ran for 463 yards on 74 carries with 7 touchdowns in IMG career (14 games); missed his entire junior season in 2023 due to knee injury.
- Rushed for 1,336 yards on 170 carries with 10 touchdowns in freshman year at Savannah Calvary Day.
- Father, Derrick, played quarterback at The Citadel (1994-95).
- No. 44 running back nationally and No. 67 player in Florida, per the On3 Industry Ranking.

JORDAN MARSHALL • RB
Jr. • Cincinnati
Ht.: 5-11 • Wt.: 216

- A second-team All-Big Ten selection, Marshall was named the team's Co-Offensive Player of the Year in 2025, appearing in 11 contests with four starts.
- Registered 150 rush attempts for a team-best 932 yards and 10 touchdowns in 2025, adding 9 catches for 92 yards.
- Appeared in five games in 2024 with three appearances at running back with one start, and rushed for 120 yards on 31 carries.
- Also returned 9 kickoffs for 225 yards.
- Started in the Dec. 31, 2024, ReliaQuest Bowl versus Alabama, rushing 23 times for 100 yards and winning MVP honors.
- Totaled 6,196 all-purpose yards in his prep career, including an Archbishop Moeller program-record 4,787 rushing yards with 80 touchdowns (15 receiving).
- Tallied 1,554 rushing yards and 21 total touchdowns as a senior in 2023, after rushing for 1,961 yards and 30 TDs as a junior.
- Named the 2023 Ohio Mr. Football, the first Wolverine since Charles Woodson in 1994.
- U-M's highest-rated 2023 signee, slotting as the 87th overall player, fourth-best running back nationally and the No. 3 player in Ohio, per the On3 Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Att.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
2024	5/1	31	120	3.9	0
2025	11/4	150	932	6.2	10
Total	**16/4**	**181**	**1,052**	**5.8**	**10**

NEWCOMERS

JONATHAN BROWN • RB
Fr. • Westerville, Ohio
Ht.: 6-3 • Wt.: 200

- Enrolled early this spring.
- A three-star recruit, the No. 803 overall player and No. 49 running back in the nation, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

SAVION HITER • RB
Fr. • Louisa, Va.
Ht.: 6-0 • Wt.: 210

- Enrolled in January 2026.
- Rushed for 1,445 yards and 25 TDs as a senior, after putting up 1,698 rushing yards and 26 scores as a junior.
- Totaled 5,529 rushing yards and 84 touchdowns in his prep career.
- Under Armour All-American Game selection in 2025.
- 2025 Gatorade and MaxPreps Player of the Year in Virginia.
- A five-star-plus prospect and the No. 12 overall player and No. 1 running back in the 2026 class, according to the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Power Move

JJ Buchanan Heads East With Championship Hopes

BY JOHN BORTON

Most entrants into the college football transfer portal harbor a beef against the school they're leaving — playing time, perceived future status, etc. Not so with Michigan sophomore wideout JJ Buchanan. For him, it was more of a leap from great to the very top rung.

Buchanan certainly doesn't regret a hugely successful freshman year at Utah. He played in 13 games and started seven, making 26 catches for 427 yards and 5 touchdowns. He saved his best for last, hauling in 4 receptions for 76 yards and a touchdown in Utah's Las Vegas Bowl victory over Nebraska.

Just a few months later, he's settling into Ann Arbor, wearing maize and blue and dreaming of leaping catches in front of 110,000 on football Saturdays. No regrets, only real excitement for what's ahead.

"Yeah, huge move," Buchanan reflected. "I believed in the coaches and I really wanted to follow them. I went in the portal and they ended up reaching out to me. It felt right. I love it here. I love the legacy and the history of Michigan football. I'm looking forward to bringing them back to their glory."

As a freshman at Utah last fall, Buchanan made 26 catches for 427 yards and 5 touchdowns.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Buchanan's father, Jeff, is a native Michigander, one who understands the difficulties involved in such a move. But with head coach Kyle Whittingham, offensive coordinator Jason Beck, receivers coach Micah Simon and tight ends coach Freddie Whittingham similarly transported, any doubts about the move disappeared like snowflakes drifting into a volcano.

"He had a lot of love for Utah," Jeff Buchanan stressed. "But when you have all of his coaches going to Michigan … it's so important for a player on a team to have that familiarity with the coaching staff. He's an offensive player, and most of the offensive coaches are there. Now he's in the transfer portal and they want him to come there and at least look at it, to see if it's an option. When you look at it from that context, you're not surprised at all."

The younger Buchanan's confidence in what's to come isn't built on hope. Rather, it's having experienced firsthand Michigan's new head coach running a team, and operating in an offense run by Beck, one that finished second in the nation in scoring average.

Envisioning it playing out in Ann Arbor represents no stretch.

"It will be a very dynamic offense," Bu-

chanan said. "Coach Beck knows how to use his personnel to the best of their abilities. I'm just excited to see what we did last year, bringing Utah to where they are now. I think it will be the same, bringing Michigan along. Michigan didn't have the best offensive production, and he'll bring that up however many notches. I believe in that 1,000 percent. He did it at New Mexico, he did it at Utah, and he'll do it again at Michigan."

If Buchanan needed any more incentive to make the move, an early and growing relationship with the starting quarterback never hurts. Rising sophomore QB Bryce Underwood helped recruit the 6-3, 225-pound playmaker, an effort that should significantly boost the quarterback's potential targets.

"He was the first person to text me, when I was in the portal," Buchanan said. "He texted me and he wanted me to come here. When I first got here, my first night, we were out there throwing, two or three times. He wants to get the work in as much as I do. We're on the same page. We have one goal — we want to get to the championship. We'll build that connection and be on the same page when the season comes."

An upgraded pass threat means a less leveraged run defense. So, there's potential for all-around improvement in the offense before Beck makes his first play call, in Buchanan's mind.

"Yes, 100 percent," he said. "I think the pass game will complement the run game, and the run game will complement the pass game. I think it will be a very dynamic offense, and with Bryce's ability to run, it's just going to be a three-headed monster in that way."

A Rivalry Twist

That three-headed monster will be knocking heads with Michigan State at Michigan Stadium on Nov. 7. Turns out, Jeff Buchanan — retired from the fire service, and pursuing a second career in telecommunications with AT&T — graduated from MSU. He quickly shuts down any potential conversation about divided loyalties, since blood is thicker than diploma parchment.

"It's funny, man," Jeff Buchanan mused. "As you can imagine, my buddies were busting my chops in a chat the last few weeks. Wanting to know what I'm going to do when it comes to the Michigan-Michigan State game, if I'm going to wear maize and blue or green and white. I'm going to eliminate the mystery right away. It's maize and blue. For me, it's family first, right? I went to Michigan State, and it was good to me.

"But there's no comparison to what Michigan has already done for my son, and what Michigan *can* do for my son in the future. It's too easy for me to make a decision to rally behind that."

"He's always been a Michigan fan," his son added. "He respects them. He knows to what degree this football program is. He was just super excited for the opportunity. The stars aligned, and this was the place for me to be. He was super happy about it."

He's also thrilled to see his son's considerable talents in a Michigan uniform. Jeff Buchanan amiably calls his assessment "biased dad talk, balanced with objective data," and that's both fun and fair.

"JJ is a special type of athlete," Jeff Buchanan said. "He's nearly 6-4, he's very strong. If you're putting him in the Combine, before he even got to Utah, he benched 225 21 times. That's a pretty big number, coming out of high school. He was tested at Utah at just over a 40-inch vertical. He was a basketball player in high school and started dunking when he was 13. He brings a lot of athleticism.

"He's got long arms, he's got great hands. Add in familiarity with play calling, he can really just concentrate on squeezing the ball and getting yards after catch, hopefully getting into the end zone."

The dad isn't alone in that assessment. Michigan's record-setting freshman receiver last season, Andrew Marsh, insists Buchanan will prove a big boost for the wide receivers, with Whittingham able to deploy a top-notch 1-2 punch at the position.

"He's a great addition to the room," Marsh said. "He's somebody that can definitely help us stretch the field and somebody who can go up and get it and even make those tough blocks. He can really get in there and use his size."

Big Stage, Big Hopes

Both son and father are pumped up about the younger Buchanan using his skills on the stage they're about to experience.

"It's awesome," JJ Buchanan said of Michigan Stadium. "The first time I saw it was on my visit, and now we've had practice in there. Super cool to be in The Big House. It's something you only dream of. It's super cool to be in there, and I can't wait for it to be 110,000 there on game day."

Jeff Buchanan — born in Detroit and a graduate of St. Francis Cabrini in Allen Park — noted: "I've been in Crisler Arena, I've been in Michigan Stadium on game day. I had some friends that went to Michigan. I've been able to tell JJ and the rest of the family, nobody has seen anything like this. The tailgating, the hundreds of thousands that come into Ann Arbor. There are 110,000 that fit into the stadium, but there's another 100,000 or more running around the stadium and filling up the bars and restaurants. It's going to be an experience he hasn't had yet, and I'm excited to see it."

"JJ's a great addition to the room. He's somebody that can de nitely help us stretch the eld and somebody who can go up and get it and even make those tough blocks. He can really get in there and use his size."

U-M SOPHOMORE WR ANDREW MARSH

There are no limits to Michigan's opportunity, the imported wideout mused. He knows for certain what he's excited about.

"Man, first the Ohio State game," he marveled. "I can't wait to play them. It's the biggest rivalry in college football. So, to be a part of that game is something every kid dreams of. You only see it on TV. I've watched that game … I can't even put on my fingers how many times I've watched that game. That game will be a dream come true."

Beyond that, he expanded: "I'm super excited. The sky's the limit for this team. We all have a common goal — Big Ten championship first, and I really, truly believe we'll be in my home town of [Las] Vegas for that national championship game." ❑

ON TARGET AT RECEIVER

Retention, Portal Catches And Recruiting Bolster Michigan Wideout Options

BY JOHN BORTON

Sophomore receiver Andrew Marsh posted a record-setting rookie season for the Wolverines. He'll no doubt be a top concern for opposing defensive coordinators, but they won't be able to gang up on him too much.

That's because the choices for sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood or anyone behind center for Michigan increased dramatically over the past few months. Sophomore wideout JJ Buchanan and elite recruit Salesi Moa followed Kyle Whittingham out of Utah. Sophomore Jaime Ffrench bolted from the Texas roster to become a Wolverine. Add that trio to Marsh and capable returners such as senior Kendrick Bell, sophomore Jamar Browder, junior Channing Goodwin, grad C.J. Charleston and sophomore Jacob Washington, to come up with a receiving roster abounding in both talent and depth. In addition, freshmen Travis Johnson and Jaylen Pile intend to make an impact.

"Andrew Marsh is a tremendous talent," Whittingham observed during spring football "That's very evident. Jaime Ffrench, who we brought in from Texas, has done a really nice job. Salesi Moa, our true freshman, has really looked sharp in the workouts along with JJ Buchanan, a transfer from Utah. Those are probably the top four.

"There's still jockeying for positions in the next four. You typically travel with about eight or seven receivers. We know that those top four are pretty darn good, and we're just trying to sort out that next tier. But those four guys are going to be very good Big Ten receivers, in my opinion."

Whittingham put a finer point on it following the spring game. In that Blue versus Maize scrimmage at Michigan Stadium, Ffrench and Moa each made 4 catches for 26 yards, Browder 2 for 26 and Bell 1 for 20. Marsh played sparingly (like many of Michigan's known commodities) and didn't have a reception.

"Salesi — you saw him make a few nice catches today," Whittingham said. "He started off spring really well, hit a little bit of a wall toward mid-spring ball, but then started to progress and take off again toward the end. I think, like [freshman running back] Savion [Hiter] and [freshman quarterback] Tommy [Carr], his ceiling is very high. He has a bright future.

"The pass catchers in general today didn't have a lot of drops. There might have been one or two that we could've come away with. Overall, the receivers have had a really nice spring.

"Andrew Marsh is our wide receiver one. There's no doubt about that. JJ Buchanan is wide receiver two. Then, we are trying to figure out who's going to be three, four and five. That's still a work in progress."

Michigan football radio analyst and former team captain and All-American Jon Jansen likes

Andrew Marsh became a starter in the fifth game last season and went on to pile up a team-leading 45 catches for 651 yards and 4 touchdowns en route to earning honorable mention All-Big Ten honors.
PHOTO BY TY KORNBLUE

the progress the Wolverines' wide receiver room in general has made over the past few months. He sees it as a major plus for sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood.

"He will have plenty of weapons to throw to," Jansen said.

Marsh Won't Let U-M Get Bogged Down

Marsh became a top priority to keep in Ann Arbor following his rookie season. He set Michigan freshman receiving records, piling up a team-leading 45 catches for 651 yards and 4 touchdowns. Marsh solidified himself as a top target for Underwood and caused thousands more drops among U-M fans' jaws than his own hands produced. One particular head-turning, one-handed grab became a top offensive highlight of the season.

Underwood can spread the ball around more this year, but he'll be looking for No. 3, without question. (Marsh wore No. 4 last season before switching to No. 3 in the Citrus Bowl against Texas.)

"The receivers have stepped up," Whittingham noted, naming the wideouts as one of the 2026 team's strengths. "Andrew Marsh is the leader in that room, him and JJ Buchanan. Those two guys, in particular, have had really good springs."

Buchanan enjoys the luxury of already knowing much of the coaching staff. His head coach, offensive coordinator Jason Beck and receivers coach Micah Simon all made the sojourn from Salt Lake City to Ann Arbor, after getting a very productive freshman season out of the now-Michigan sophomore.

At Utah last season, Buchanan started seven games among the 13 in which he played, securing 26 catches for 427 yards and 5 touchdowns. His season totals include the 4 grabs for 76 yards he made against Nebraska in the Las Vegas Bowl.

For Buchanan, the change of venue didn't mean an adjustment to the system.

"He came [to Utah] in the summertime as a true freshman," Beck recalled. "So, we didn't have spring ball with him.

"Early on in fall camp, he made some big, contested catches. We gave him more opportunities and more opportunities, and he just kept going."

Ffrench didn't get that kind of run on the Longhorns' roster, but he showed enough to garner Michigan's interest. The Wolverines saw him in the Citrus Bowl with Texas, after a freshman season in which he caught a single pass for 6 yards. He came out of the Florida prep ranks regarded as the No. 9 wideout in the nation.

THEY SAID IT

"We've been airing the ball out a lot. It's something I'm really looking forward to. I hope everybody is looking forward to it. I feel like we're going to be dangerous this year." — *Sophomore wide receiver Andrew Marsh*

He'll be one of many adjusting to new surroundings and new teammates in the ever-changing world of college football.

"The team has got to come together," Whittingham observed. "In this day and age, you have half a new football team pretty much every year, so the bonding and coming together as a team is going to be critical this summer. We'll have a few team activities in line to help that take place.

"The leaders have to lead and continue to set the pace. If you've got the top 10 percent of your team that are working their butt off and training hard, everyone else seems to follow suit. It will be critical for those top-10-percent guys to really set the bar and have everyone else live up to that."

Moa has never set foot into an actual college game, but he caused a buzz in the Michigan spring practices with his speed and quickness. The freshman out of Og-

WIDE RECEIVERS

0	Kendrick Bell (6-2, 205), Sr.
81	Jamar Browder (6-5, 215), So.
13	JJ Buchanan (6-3, 225), So.
82	C.J. Charleston (6-0, 190), Gr.
10	Jaime Ffrench (6-1, 185), So.
9	Channing Goodwin (6-1, 197), Jr.
86	Travis Johnson (6-2, 185), Fr.
3	Andrew Marsh (6-0, 190), So.
12	Salesi Moa (6-2, 175), Fr.
20	Jaylen Pile (6-0, 195), Fr.
84	Jacob Washington (6-3, 197), So.

[FYI]

- Sophomore **Andrew Marsh** caught 45 passes for 651 yards (14.5 average) and 4 touchdowns last season. The last time the Wolverines had a wideout coming back that had as many receiving yards as Marsh did last season was 2020, when Ronnie Bell returned from a 758-yard campaign in 2019. However, the 2020 season was shortened to six games, so the Wolverines didn't fully see the fruits of that. In the 2021 opener, Bell suffered a season-ending knee injury. Prior to that instance, it was Jehu Chesson (764 yards in 2015) and Amara Darboh (727), both returning in 2016.
- Sophomore **JJ Buchanan** paced Utah with 9 contested catches last season, which would have led Michigan in that category. Marsh (6), senior **Kendrick Bell** (1) and junior **Channing Goodwin** (1) — the Wolverines' returning wide receivers who had at least 1 contested grab last season — combined for 8.
- With none in 2024 and only 2 in 2025, Michigan has had just 2 passing plays of 40-plus yards over the last two seasons combined, after recording 5 in 2023, 13 in 2022 and 14 in 2021.
- Michigan recorded just 14 completions on passes of 20-plus air yards last season, ranking 106th in the nation and 13th in the Big Ten, per Sports Info Solutions. Marsh was responsible for 8 of those receptions.

QUICK FACTS

Position Coach: Micah Simon (1st year at U-M)
Returning Starters: Andrew Marsh (9 career starts)
Departing Starters: Donaven McCulley (13 at U-M, 11 at Indiana)
Projected New Starters: JJ Buchanan (7 starts at Utah), Salesi Moa
Top Reserves: Kendrick Bell, Jaime Ffrench, Travis Johnson, Channing Goodwin
Newcomers: Johnson, Moa, Jaylen Pile
Moved In: Buchanan, Ffrench
Moved Out: Fredrick Moore (Michigan State), Semaj Morgan (UCLA), Anthony Simpson (Toledo)
Rookie Impact: Moa, Johnson
Most Improved Player: Marsh
Best Pro Prospect: Marsh

den, Utah, emerged from Fremont High as a consensus four-star recruit, the No. 1 player in the state who accumulated 226 catches, 3,757 yards and 44 touchdowns over the course of his four-year high school career, and the No. 39 wide receiver nationally.

As a senior, he snagged 63 catches for 1,272 yards and 16 touchdowns. Of late, he turned a few heads at the next level.

"Salesi Moa, our freshman wide receiver that just got here a few months ago, has done some really good things," Whittingham said. "I'm not saying that's a surprise, but he's really made strides."

Following the spring game, Whittingham even mentioned him in conjunction with Hiter, who figures to see extensive time on the field this season.

"They're both highly recruited, highly rated freshmen coming in," noted the head coach. "Both are just fresh out of high school. They've only been here a few months. For being in the program for three months and very young, I thought they both did nice jobs today. Both of their futures are very bright."

The fight for game snaps, targets and providing Michigan depth is on after that quartet.

Among the returning candidates, Goodwin leads the production numbers from last season. He made 12 catches for 148 yards in 2025. Bell secured 3 grabs for 54 yards and a touchdown against Texas in the Citrus Bowl.

Johnson also stirred talk among his teammates, regarding his spring ball efforts. For Oscar Smith High in Virginia last year, Johnson topped 40 catches, 1,200 yards and 15 touchdowns. Mean-

X-FACTOR

Freshman **SALESI MOA**, a four-star recruit, the nation's No. 1 athlete and No. 42 overall prospect per Rivals, is slated to make a big impact right out of the gate, providing explosive athleticism from the slot, outside or even as a returner. He had 63 receptions for 1,272 yards and 16 touchdowns at Ogden (Utah) Fremont High last fall. Moa originally signed with Utah in December before following the coaching staff to Michigan and transferring in January 2026.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

U-M's Leading Receiver By Yardage

Season	Player	Stats
2025	Andrew Marsh	45 catches, 651 yards, 4 TD
2024	Colston Loveland (TE)	56 catches, 582 yards, 5 TD
2023	Roman Wilson	48 catches, 789 yards, 12 TD
2022	Ronnie Bell	62 catches, 889 yards, 4 TD
2021	Cornelius Johnson	39 catches, 620 yards, 3 TD
2020*	Ronnie Bell	26 catches, 401 yards, 1 TD
2019	Ronnie Bell	48 catches, 758 yards, 1 TD
2018	Nico Collins	38 catches, 632 yards, 6 TD
2017	Grant Perry	25 catches, 307 yards, 1 TD
2016	Amara Darboh	57 catches, 862 yards, 7 TD
2015	Jehu Chesson	50 catches, 764 yards, 9 TD
2014	Devin Funchess	62 catches, 733 yards, 4 TD

** Six-game season*

while, Pile made 3 catches for 11 yards in the spring game, after finishing up his prep career at Parish Episcopal in Grapevine, Texas, with 55 catches for 1,186 yards and 15 touchdowns as a senior.

Looking For Balance

Michigan rushed for 2,732 yards last season while throwing for 2,428. By contrast, Beck's offense at Utah rushed for an eye-popping 3,659 yards and threw for 2,816. Beck talks about balance, like most offensive coordinators, but stresses he's looking to match the offense to the skills he sees among the various position groups.

To that end, he's still keeping his options open.

"We want to install a base of what we're going to do, what we've had success with, what's been good for us," Beck assured. "But we're very much driven by the personnel — who gives us the best chance to score points, to win games.

"A lot of it is driven by the quarterback. What does the quarterback do well? We want to build the offense to his strengths and his talents. So that can look different based off who the quarterback is and what they do well.

"After that, we want to look at the O-line. There's no sense in doing stuff if the O-line can't block it up at a high level. Then after that, it's all the skill guys we're putting out there with them.

"It's molding the offense to that. So, at first, it's put in the base stuff, evaluate, see who's emerging, see what guys are doing really well, and then start building the offense toward those strengths and those capabilities."

Beck certainly expressed no lack of enthusiasm for the players he's inheriting.

"What's really stood out to me about these kids is they love football," he said. "They're high achievers. They're driven. They're focused. When we met with them, we were very impressed. You can tell they come from great families.

"They come from great high schools and programs that have helped them develop really successful habits to be in the position they're at, to be at a great university, playing football at the highest level, and to be academically successful. You can tell they want to work and they want to achieve." ❑

The Search For No. 2

Among those on Michigan's present roster, sophomore Andrew Marsh (45 receptions, 651 yards, 4 TDs) looks like the clear candidate to be the Wolverines' leading receiver. He held that spot as a true freshman, with now-departed Donaven McCulley posting 39 catches for 588 yards and 3 touchdowns last season.

Michigan's leading receiver generally tops 600 yards, with some notable exceptions. It stands to reason Marsh will raise his receiving yards from 2025, barring any setbacks. The bigger question involves, who takes the No. 2 spot, and what will his production be like?

Michigan has a host of candidates, led right now by Utah-import sophomore JJ Buchanan — who himself could battle for the top spot, given the right circumstances. Here's a look back at the past 10 years (excluding the six-game COVID season in 2020) and what the Wolverines' top two wide receivers in receiving yards produced.

— John Borton

YEAR	PLAYER	CATCHES	YARDS	TDS
2025	Andrew Marsh	45	651	4
	Donaven McCulley	39	588	3
2024	Tyler Morris	23	248	2
	Semaj Morgan	27	139	1
2023	Roman Wilson	48	789	12
	Cornelius Johnson	47	604	1
2022	Ronnie Bell	62	889	4
	Cornelius Johnson	32	499	6
2021	Cornelius Johnson	39	620	3
	Roman Wilson	25	420	3
2019	Ronnie Bell	48	758	1
	Nico Collins	37	729	7
2018	Nico Collins	38	632	6
	Donovan Peoples-Jones	47	612	8
2017	Grant Perry	25	307	1
	Donovan Peoples-Jones	22	277	0
2016	Amara Darboh	57	862	7
	Jehu Chesson	35	500	2
2015	Jehu Chesson	50	764	9
	Amara Darboh	58	727	5

PRESEASON ANALYSIS

STARTERS ★★★½

This crew took a big step forward with the addition of Utah sophomore transfer JJ Buchanan, who enjoyed a very promising rookie year in Salt Lake City. The lanky wideout will combine with sophomore Andrew Marsh — the leader of this pack following a breakout freshman season of his own — as a potentially dynamic starting combo. They should be a major boost to sophomore QB Bryce Underwood's anticipated step forward this fall.

DEPTH ★★★

The Wolverines feature a host of candidates here, who will sort themselves out in terms of production and targeting as the results roll in. Junior Channing Goodwin and senior Kendrick Bell are among the veterans vying for top targeting, while Texas sophomore transfer Jaime Ffrench and freshmen Salesi Moa — who followed the staff east after committing to Utah — Travis Johnson and Jaylen Pile all will be battling for time.

OVERALL ★★★½

Michigan's wideouts feature more potential top-end firepower than last year's, which is good news for both Underwood and the offense. Buchanan, Ffrench and Moa directly impact Michigan's upgrade, demonstrating the draw of The Big House, etc. Meanwhile, Marsh has established himself as a top target among a crew that should provide strong balance for an anticipated effective rushing attack.

POSITION COACH

Micah Simon is in his first season at Michigan and fourth as a wide receivers coach in college.

Simon was an offensive analyst for quarterbacks and wide receivers at Syracuse in 2022, before becoming an on-field wideouts coach in 2023 (FCS Northern Colorado), 2024 (New Mexico) and 2025 (Utah). He worked for offensive coordinator Jason Beck at Syracuse, New Mexico and Utah.

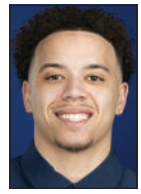
A former BYU wide receiver from 2015-19, Simon appeared in 36 games and earned a degree in exercise science. He spent time with the Carolina Panthers as an undrafted free agent (NFL) and BC Lions (CFL) prior to entering coaching.

A Dallas, Texas, native, Simon attended Bishop Dunne High School.

RETURNING PLAYERS

KENDRICK BELL • WR
Sr. • Kansas City, Mo.
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 205

- Made 3 catches for 54 yards and 1 touchdown in 13 appearances in 2025.
- Appeared in all 13 games in 2024 with 6 starts and 7 catches for 70 yards.
- Did not see game action as a freshman in 2023, maintaining his redshirt.
- Switched from quarterback to wide receiver after enrolling at U-M.
- First-team Class 6 all-state as a senior and named most outstanding high school player in the Kansas City area.
- Completed 224 of 339 passes for 3,228 yards and 35 touchdowns, while also rushing for 670 yards and 10 TDs during his senior season at Park Hill High.
- Brother of former U-M wide receiver Ronnie Bell (2018-22).
- Rivals Industry Ranking three-star recruit, ranked No. 47 among quarterbacks and as the 21st-best player in Missouri in the 2023 class.



Year	GP/GS	Rec.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
2024	13/6	7	70	10.0	0
2025	13/1	3	54	18.0	1
Total	**26/7**	**10**	**124**	**12.4**	**1**

JAMAR BROWDER • WR
So. • Jacksonville, Fla.
Ht.: 6-5 • Wt.: 215

- Played in seven contests in 2025, after enrolling early.
- Caught 50 passes for 1,137 yards and 12 touchdowns during his senior season at Santaluces Community High School, along with 10 rushes for 126 yards.
- Hauled in 39 receptions for 730 yards and 14 TDs as a junior.
- A three-star recruit, Browder was the No. 83 wide receiver in the land and the No. 69 player in Florida, per Rivals Industry Ranking.

C.J. CHARLESTON • WR
Gr. • Cleveland
Ht.: 6-0 • Wt.: 190

- Missed the entire 2025 season with an injury.
- Appeared in 10 games with 2 starts at wide receiver with 1 catch for 22 yards in 2024.
- Transferred to U-M in May 2024 from Youngstown State.
- Started all 13 outings for the Penguins in 2023, racking up 33 receptions for 503 yards and 4 touchdowns, after missing the entire 2022 season with an Achilles injury.
- Reeled in 16 catches for 147 yards in 2021, following a 7-reception, 112-yard spring

Sophomore Jaime Ffrench was rated the No. 9 receiver and No. 59 overall prospect in the Rivals Industry Ranking for the 2025 class. He redshirted at Texas last season and transferred to Michigan in January 2026.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

2021 campaign that was delayed due to COVID.
- Redshirted in 2019, appearing in four contests.

Year	GP/GS	Rec.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
2019	4/0*	5	105	21.0	0
2020	5/4*	7	112	16.0	0
2021	10/6*	16	147	9.2	0
2022	0/0*	0	0	0	0
2023	13/13*	33	503	15.2	4
2024	10/2	1	22	22.0	0
2025	*DNP, injured*				
Total	**42/25**	**62**	**889**	**14.3**	**4**

** at Youngstown State*

CHANNING GOODWIN • WR
Jr. • Charlotte, N.C.
Ht.: 6-1 • Wt.: 197

- Competed in all 13 games with six starts in 2025, recording 12 catches for 148 yards.
- Played in 4 games with 3 appearances at wide receiver during true freshman season in 2024.
- Helped lead Charlotte (N.C.) Providence Day to three straight state titles, including the last two while playing with former U-M quarterback Jadyn Davis.
- Made 65 receptions for 1,094 yards and 14 touchdowns as a senior in 2023.
- Hauled in 68 grabs for 968 yards and 15 scores as a junior.
- His father, Jonathan Goodwin, played offensive line for Michigan from 1998-2001 and became a fifth-round NFL Draft choice.
- A three-star recruit, the nation's 85th-best wide receiver and the No. 18 prospect in North Carolina, according to the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Rec.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
2024	4/0	0	0	0	0
2025	13/6	12	148	12.3	0
Total	**17/6**	**12**	**148**	**12.3**	**0**

ANDREW MARSH • WR
So. • Katy, Texas
Ht.: 6-0 • Wt.: 190

- Led Michigan with 45 receptions and 651 receiving yards with 4 touchdowns and rushed twice for 13 yards while appearing in 13 outings with eight starts as a freshman in 2025.
- Named a Freshman All-American by On3 and honorable mention All-Big Ten by the coaches and media.
- Also returned 4 punts for 45 yards (14-yard long) and 16 kicks for 378 yards (51-yard long).
- Enrolled at U-M in January 2025.
- Selected to participate in the 2025 Navy All-American Bowl.
- Hauled in 65 catches for a school-record 1,172 yards with 11 touchdowns and added over 200 yards as a returner during his senior season at Katy Jordan High School.
- Caught 65 passes for 1,158 yards and 15 TDs as a junior.
- Recorded 53 receptions for 845 yards and 11 TDs as a sophomore.
- AAU All-American in the high jump and as a member of a 4x400-relay team.
- No. 157 player and No. 22 wide receiver in the 2025 class, and the No. 25 player in Texas, according to the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Rec.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
2025	13/8	45	651	14.5	4

JACOB WASHINGTON • WR
So. • Harvey, La.
Ht.: 6-3 • Wt.: 197

- Appeared in two games as a freshman in 2025, maintaining his redshirt.
- Helped team win the 2024 Louisiana Division II state championship and received Most Outstanding Player honors from GeauxPreps.com after making 8 catches for 105 yards and 2 touchdowns in the title game.
- Named Class 4A first-team all-state in 2024 by the Louisiana Sportswriters Association.
- Also lettered in basketball and track and field with a focus on sprints and the long jump.
- No. 94 overall player and No. 14 wide receiver nationally, and No. 5 player in Louisiana, per Rivals.

NEWCOMERS

JJ BUCHANAN • WR
So. • Henderson, Nev.
Ht.: 6-3 • Wt.: 225

- Transferred in from Utah, where he spent the 2025 season and hauled in 26 receptions for 427 yards and 5 touchdowns. He started seven of his 13 appearances.
- Totaled 1,023 receiving yards and 11 touchdowns as a prep senior for Coronado High School.
- A three-star prospect and the nation's No. 573 overall prospect in the 2025 class, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Rec.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
2025	13/7*	26	427	16.4	5

** at Utah*

JAIME FFRENCH • WR
So. • Jacksonville, Fla.
Ht.: 6-1 • Wt.: 185
- Transferred to U-M following one season at Texas, where he redshirted with four game appearances in 2025, catching 1 pass for 6 yards.
- Attended Mandarin High School, where he hauled in 35 receptions for 621 yards and 2 touchdowns in nine games as a senior. He put up 1,247 yards and 14 scores on 62 catches in 15 outings as a junior.
- Participated in the Navy All-American Bowl.
- A four-star prospect, Ffrench was the No. 59 overall player and No. 9 wide receiver in the 2025 class, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

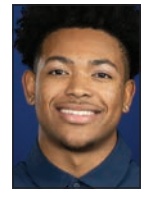
TRAVIS JOHNSON • WR
Fr. • Chesapeake, Va.
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 185

- Enrolled at U-M in January 2026.
- Pulled down 56 passes for 1,157 yards and 15 TDs as a senior to help lead Oscar Smith High to its second straight Virginia Class 6A state title and was named the Virginia Class 6A Offensive Player of the Year.
- Caught 63 passes for 1,053 yards and 17 TDs as a junior on a 15-0 Class 6A state title team.
- Brother, TJ Johnson, plays tight end at Southern Mississippi, after transferring in from West Virginia, where their father, Tory Johnson Sr., also played.
- A four-star recruit, Johnson checked in as the No. 125 overall player and No. 18 wide receiver in the 2026 class, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

SALESI MOA • WR
Fr. • Ogden, Utah
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 175

- Briefly enrolled at Utah after signing in December 2025 but transferred to Michigan the following month.
- Accumulated 226 catches, 3,757 yards (16.6 average) and 44 touchdowns during his four-year career at Fremont High.
- Rated a four-star prospect, the No. 42 overall player and the No. 1 athlete in the 2026 class, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.
- Named to the 2026 Under Armour All-America Game and Polynesian Bowl.

JAYLEN PILE • WR
Fr. • Grapevine, Texas
Ht.: 6-0 • Wt.: 195



- Caught 55 passes for 1,186 yards (21.6 average) and 15 touchdowns as a senior at Parish Episcopal School. He recorded 63 receptions for 1,367 yards and 19 scores as a junior in 2024.
- A three-star recruit, Pile checked in as the No. 185 wide receiver in the nation, according to the Rivals Industry Ranking.

TIGHT FIT

Michigan Tight Ends Look To Contribute With Versatility

BY JOHN BORTON

Michigan featured a host of extremely productive pass-catching tight ends over the past dozen years, including All-Americans such as Colston Loveland and Jake Butt. The landscape could be changing with the advent of a new coaching regime in Ann Arbor, although a determined group of tight ends in Schembechler Hall stands ready to help the cause in various ways.

"I think we fit into all phases of the offense," junior tight end Hogan Hansen observed, near the end of spring football. "It's a very explosive offense, both pass and run. It's pushing us to grow our all-around game and excel in all phases of the offense."

For the established Wolverines looking for insight into the plan, simply dialing up Utah football 2025 proved useful.

"We watched a lot of Utah's offensive film from last year because that's where Coach [Jason] Beck and the staff are coming from," Hansen noted. "People like Dalton Kincaid have played at Utah. It's more just watching last year's offense and the tight ends."

Kincaid, the stalwart Buffalo Bills tight end, recorded 1,414 receiving yards and 16 touchdowns at Utah, becoming a first-round draft pick in 2023. So, it's not as if the new crew in blue isn't aware of the effectiveness of a pass-catching tight end.

Jon Jansen, who came to Michigan as a tight end, but became a two-time captain and All-American at offensive tackle, helping the Wolverines to the 1997 national championship and now serving as the color analyst on U-M radio broadcasts, keeps a keen eye on the men up front. That includes the tight ends, whom he says will look to give the Wolverines a boost even when they're not featured.

"There are some blurred lines there," Jansen said. "When you look at Utah over the last couple of years, and talking to the coaches, they've been very open about using a sixth offensive lineman, whether it's in line or a wing. They want to utilize a sixth offensive lineman in the run game and in pass protection.

"You have guys like [6-3, 245-pound senior tight end] Jalen Hoffman or [6-1, 244-pound sophomore tight end] Eli Owens that are more Max Bredeson-style players. You could use them as offensive linemen in the blocking scheme if you need a blocker to go from a wing position and pull him to block on the other side. Maybe you get there a little faster than you would with an offensive lineman."

Bredeson, of course, proved a lights-out blocker throughout his Michigan career, and any versions of him would mark a big plus for this crew. But that isn't necessarily their only role, Jansen assured.

"You will see them in the backfield every once in a while as fullbacks," he said. "The tight end position is really where you'll see the traditional tight ends, like [6-5, 246-pound senior] Deakon Tonielli, [6-4, 245-pound senior] Zack Marshall and [6-5, 240-pound] Hogan Hansen. Those guys will see more of the pass catching responsibilities come their way, and they'll be more like [sophomore transfer] JJ Buchanan was used early on in the season last year at Utah before ultimately becoming a wide receiver. The ability to create mismatches with those guys as receivers is big, and I call it a bit of a blurred line.

"We saw it with Colston. We didn't see it as much last year, maybe because we didn't have an elite tight end. We started to see more of Zack Marshall and some Deakon at the end of the season, but Hogan was hurt.

"When you want to go five wides and you

X-FACTOR

Can **HOGAN HANSEN** stay healthy? The junior dealt with injuries last season but is the best pass catcher of Michigan's tight ends, having shown flashes of special potential in both in 2024 (7 receptions for 78 yards and 1 touchdown) and with limited action in 2025 (6 catches for 74 yards).

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Tight End Production Last 10 Seasons

Season	Receptions	Yards	% Of Rec. Yds.	TDs
2025	56	604	24.9%	2
2024	79	792	47.2%	6
2023	70	925	28.9%	5
2022	62	790	25.7%	5
2021	57	618	19.3%	5
2020*	22	199	13.2%	1
2019	41	542	16.6%	7
2018	54	793	28.3%	4
2017	54	697	31.3%	5
2016	59	667	24.2%	6

*Only played six games due to the COVID-19 pandemic

want to go bigger — you'll see Hogan Hansen, Zack Marshall and Deakon Tonielli as a part of that package. If you're going five wides and you want more speed, you'll see more of the wide receivers.

"There's still a great opportunity to utilize that position. Dalton Kincaid was a stud at Utah. They're going to use those guys for what they can do and provide for this offense."

Breaking It Down

Hansen needed to have some lingering shoulder issues taken care of prior to last season, and he missed prep time for the 2025 campaign. Soft tissue injuries followed, and the year proved a frustrating one for him, with 6 catches for 74 yards.

"Two years ago in the Arkansas State game is when we got introduced to him," Jansen said. "Colston was down and Hogan caught his first touchdown. He can run any route you want. He's a guy who can create mismatches. You have to put a strong safety on him. You can't cover him with a nickel, because the size will be too much.

"He's faster than most linebackers. Having him as a part of this offensive package will do a couple of things. You get in the red zone, and he creates mismatches. You make that defense match your personnel in a way that makes them vulnerable. Maybe they're trying to take away Hogan's ability to catch passes, but now they're not as well prepared to stop the run.

"I don't know if he'll be a Colston, because he doesn't have the same size and catch radius. But he has a lot of the same skills, as far as his speed, his footwork, his ability to run routes."

Wolverines a year ago, making 16 catches for 199 yards and 1 touchdown. He started against Washington among his trio of starting assignments, shining with 5 catches for 72 yards, including a touchdown grab. The team ultimately named him Michigan's Most Improved Player on Offense.

"I know he's looking forward to getting more opportunity in the pass game," Jansen said. "But in talking to him, he wants to be that traditional tight end, that well-rounded guy, setting the edge, being low, working on combo blocks with the O-line and the tackle. I see him as a combination. It's the bridge between say a Jalen Hoffman and a Hogan Hansen.

"If you want a guy that's going to be inline to provide you the best of both worlds, that's going to be Zack."

Tonielli also appeared in all 13 Michigan games in 2025, making two starts. He made 8 catches for 72 yards, including 2 for 20 in the Citrus Bowl against Texas. He also caught 3 passes for 38 yards in the home win over Washington

"Deakon has just got to catch the ball," Jansen said. 'We saw it a little bit at the end of last year. We saw the opportunity he had, even in the spring game [a 20-yard reception]. He's a big body. He's a big target.

"His body is more like Colston Loveland's, but he doesn't have the same speed. He's not necessarily as proficient at running routes, but he's another guy that can create mismatches just in terms of the sheer size.

"There aren't a lot of guys that match up. When you try to match him up with safeties, he dwarfs those guys."

Hoffman played in all 13 games last year, mostly on special teams, making 1 tackle. Owens got into two games as a freshman. They'll both be looking to become the

[FYI]

- Tight ends accounted for 26.5 percent of targets (87 of 328), 27.7 percent of receptions (56 of 202), 24.9 percent of receiving yards (604 of 2,428) and 18.2 percent of touchdown catches (2 of 11) for Michigan last season.
- Michigan has had a tight end selected in each of the last four NFL Drafts — Luke Schoonmaker (second round, 2023), AJ Barner (fourth round, 2024), Colston Loveland (first round, 2025) and Marlin Klein (second round, 2026). Last season, Klein led his position group with 24 catches for 248 yards and 1 touchdown.
- Last season, Utah led the nation in both pass attempts (242) and rush attempts (310) with two tight ends on the field, according to Sports Info Solutions. However, the Utes heavily utilized the "rhino" position — an extra offensive lineman lining up on the end of the line — which skews those numbers. Still, Utah had a third-team All-Big 12 standout at tight end in Dallen Bentley, who accumulated 620 receiving yards and 6 touchdowns on 48 receptions.

PRESEASON ANALYSIS

STARTERS ★★★

Michigan's tight ends are looking to contribute in a number of ways while finding their footing inside a new system via a new coaching staff. For players like anticipated starter Hogan Hansen, it means seeing how much the new staff incorporates the tight ends into the passing game. Hansen battled injuries last year, but he's healthy and ready for a breakout year.

DEPTH ★★★½

Seniors Zack Marshall and Deakon Tonielli could just as easily start any given game as Hansen. They both contributed significantly last season, and they're potentially effective targets for Michigan sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood. Meanwhile, the Max Bredeson-type chops busters such as senior Jalen Hoffman and sophomore Eli Owens can deliver a boost to Michigan's overall attack with their blocking skills. The Wolverines feature a veteran bunch here, no matter who takes the starting role.

OVERALL ★★★

This group might feature the biggest question mark of the offense, going in. That's not because there's a lack of talent here — there isn't, although the next Jake Butt or Colston Loveland has yet to emerge. It's a question of how the tight ends will be employed, and that will bear close scrutiny this fall.

TIGHT ENDS	
—	Mason Bonner (6-7, 225), Fr.
80	Hogan Hansen (6-5, 240), Jr.
42	Jalen Hoffman (6-3, 245), Sr.
83	Zack Marshall (6-4, 245), Sr.
44	Eli Owens (6-1, 244), So.
88	Deakon Tonielli (6-5, 246), Sr.

QUICK FACTS

Position Coach: Freddie Whittingham (1st year at U-M)

Returning Starter: None

Departing Starter: Max Bredeson (16 career starts), Marlin Klein (12)

Projected New Starter: Hogan Hansen

Top Reserves: Zack Marshall (4), Deakon Tonielli (2), Jalen Hoffman (1)

Newcomers: Mason Bonner

Moved In: None

Moved Out: Brady Prieskorn (Mississippi)

Rookie Impact: None

Most Improved Player: Marshall

Best Pro Prospect: Hansen

hammer when the nails pop up. Michigan also has Mason Bonner, a 6-7, 225-pound tight end coming in from Denver (Colo.) Mullen High.

Fresh Start For Many

Hansen sees this year as somewhat of a redo. Given his injuries last season and a new staff in place, he's among the many Wolverines — either new to the program or somewhat on the shelf last year — looking forward to what lies ahead.

"I'm just excited to be healthy and go play healthy, without any limitations," he assured. "I'm excited to get back to it, and build off my freshman year. Last year wasn't the greatest year with how it played out for me. Just scratch all that — new offense, new staff, go out and get it this year."

The Wolverines have embraced the new staff. The expectations are clear, and the response is quick when they're not met.

"They expect things to be a certain way," Hansen observed. "When they're not, they're going to get on our butts about it. Other than that, they're going to bring us up and try to have good energy at all times. We never have any lulls in practice. We are always high-fiving each other, keeping the energy up. It's definitely increased the quality of our practices.

Senior Zack Marshall played in all 13 games for the Wolverines a year ago, with 16 catches for 199 yards and 1 touchdown. He was named as Michigan's Most Improved Player on Offense.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

"We've been able to get more done in the weight room. You'll never see sloppiness out there, when we're practicing. It's a high level, and it's been out there all spring ball."

The Wolverines intend to keep that high level going, right into the season. As for the tight ends room, they're ready to do their part — or several parts, as the case may be. ❑

A Position Rich In Tradition

Michigan has featured some outstanding tight ends over the years, and they haven't all racked up head-turning reception numbers. Some have, for certain, garnering the All-America status that often goes with that aspect of the game.

Here is a look back at Michigan's best tight end each season, over the past decade (excluding the COVID campaign of 2020).

2025 — Max Bredeson only caught 2 passes for 11 yards for the Wolverines in his last season wearing the uniform. But he remained the heart and soul of the tough-guy fighters on the squad, ready at any moment to level a defender looking to harm one of the players who grab all the headlines. He led in a host of ways and left a lasting impact on both the opposition and Michigan's history at the position.

2024 — Colston Loveland's last season in a Michigan uniform before he went on to star in the NFL was a huge one. Loveland led the Wolverines in receiving yards — by a mile. He made 56 catches for 582 yards and 5 touchdowns, with the next nearest receiver under 250. The 56 catches set a Michigan receiving record for a tight end, helping Loveland earn All-America honors and become Michigan's Offensive Skill Player of the Year.

2023 — Loveland found himself just three catches off the pace for leading the national champion Wolverines in receiving. He recorded 45 catches for 649 yards and 4 touchdowns. A first-team All-Big Ten selection by conference coaches, Loveland earned Co-Offensive Skill Player of the Year honors for the Wolverines. Most importantly, he became one of the last men standing, when time came to hand out the national championship trophy.

2022 — Luke Schoonmaker enjoyed his last season in a Michigan uniform prior to moving on to the NFL. He finished second among all U-M receivers with 35 catches, turning them into 418 yards and 3 touchdowns.

2021 — Erick All led the way for the Wolverines in his next-to-last year as a Michigan tight end. He finished just one catch off the pace for U-M's leading receiver, making 38 grabs for 437 yards and 2 touchdowns. He'll always be remembered for his winning touchdown catch at Penn State, rambling for a 47-yard TD and piling up 4 catches and 64 yards on the day.

2019 — Michigan found itself weighted toward its wideouts in this season, but Nick Eubanks still managed a respectable effort at tight end. He made 25 catches for 243 yards and 4 touchdowns, leading the U-M tight ends. Sean McKeon proved the bigger-play guy that year, averaging 18.1 yards per catch on his 13 receptions.

2018 — Not only did Zach Gentry lead the tight ends in receiving in 2018, he came within 100 yards of pacing the entire squad. He made 32 catches for 514 yards (a healthy 16.1 yards-per-catch average) and scored a pair of touchdowns.

2017 — McKeon led all Michigan receivers in Jim Harbaugh's third season at the helm, securing a team-high 31 catches for 301 yards and 3 touchdowns.

2016 — Jake Butt's 46 catches ranked No. 2 on Michigan's list in 2016. He gained 546 yards with 4 touchdowns. Butt earned the Mackey Award as the nation's top tight end and was a consensus All-American. He was also the Big Ten Kwalick-Clark Tight End of the Year.

2015 — Butt made an impression in Jim Harbaugh's first-ever game as head coach of the Wolverines, versus Kyle Whittingham's Utah Utes. Whittingham's crew got the better of the two that night in Salt Lake City, despite Butt's career highs in catches (8) and yards (93). The Michigan tight end went on to record 51 catches for 654 yards and 3 touchdowns on the season.

— John Borton

POSITION COACH

The brother of head coach Kyle Whittingham, **Freddie Whittingham** is entering his first season at Michigan, after 14 years at Utah. He was tight ends coach and recruiting coordinator from 2016-25 following a run as director of player personnel from 2012-15.

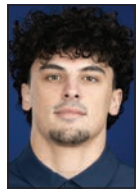
Whittingham sent five tight ends to the NFL, including two that were draft picks in Dalton Kincaid (first round to the Buffalo Bills in 2023) and Caleb Lohner (seventh round to the Denver Broncos in 2025).

A Utah tight end has caught at least one pass in 108 of the last 109 games under Whittingham's leadership. In 2025, the tight ends accounted for 88 receptions for 1,153 yards and 11 touchdowns.

The Provo, Utah, native attended BYU, where he played running back and was a team captain. Prior to entering the coaching profession, Whittingham spent nearly two decades at McGraw-Hill and Simon & Schuster as a sales and marketing executive in the higher education publishing industry.

RETURNING PLAYERS

HOGAN HANSEN • TE
Jr. • Bellevue, Wash.
Ht.: 6-5 • Wt.: 240



- Redshirted while dealing with injuries throughout the 2025 campaign, appearing in four contests.
- Recorded 6 catches for 74 yards, playing against Oklahoma, Central Michigan, USC and Texas.
- Appeared in 10 games in 2024, catching 7 passes for 78 yards and 1 touchdown, a 9-yard grab in the end zone against Arkansas State.
- Named U-M's Rookie of the Year on offense in 2024.
- Helped Bellevue (Wash.) High win Division 3A state titles as a sophomore in 2021 (14-0 record) and as senior in 2023 (11-2)
- First-team all-state pick by SBLive and King County 3A Defensive MVP in 2023.
- Hauled in 11 receptions for 224 yards and 4 touchdowns as a senior, also carried 8 times for 121 yards and 2 scores. Made 44 tackles, including 11 for loss and 6 sacks, on defense.
- Regarded as a four-star recruit, the No. 327 player and No. 22 tight end nationally, and the No. 5 prospect in Washington, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Rec.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
2024	10/0	7	78	11.1	1
2025	4/0	6	74	12.3	0
Total	**14/0**	**20**	**152**	**11.7**	**1**

THEY SAID IT

"Play-action pass is where tight ends really eat in the passing game — that's going to be the core of what we do."

— Tight ends coach Freddie Whittingham

JALEN HOFFMAN • TE
Sr. • Burke, Va.
Ht.: 6-3 • Wt.: 245

- Competed in all 13 outings on offense and special teams in 2025, registering 1 tackle.
- His 78.3 PFF run-blocking rating checked in tied ninth among FBS tight ends with 50-plus snaps.
- Played in all 13 games with two appearances on offense in 2024, after redshirting with one game appearance in 2023.
- Attended Lake Braddock Secondary School, where he was a team captain in 2022.
- Had 52 catches for 835 yards and 8 touchdowns in junior and senior seasons combined.

ZACK MARSHALL • TE
Sr. • Carlsbad, Calif.
Ht.: 6-4 • Wt.: 245

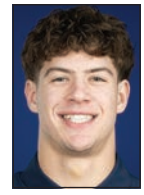
- Played in all 13 clashes with three starts in 2025, hauling in 16 catches for 199 yards and 1 touchdown.
- In 2024, suited up for 13 games on special teams, making 1 tackle; also played four games at tight end.
- Appeared in two games at tight end and one on special teams as a freshman in 2023.
- Competed his senior season at Carlsbad High after playing wide receiver at Santa Fe Christian as sophomore and junior.
- Named tight end MVP during the 2022 Elite 11 Camp.
- Recorded 23 catches for 284 yards and 5 touchdowns in his senior campaign at Carlsbad High after sitting out first four games due to transfer rules.
- Caught 44 passes for 1,012 yards and 9 touchdowns during junior season at Santa Fe Christian.
- Ranked No. 528 overall and No. 26 among tight ends in the 2023 class, checking in as a three-star recruit per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Rec.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
2023	2/0	0	0	0	0
2024	13/0	0	0	0	0
2025	13/3	16	199	12.4	1
Total	**28/3**	**16**	**199**	**12.4**	**1**

ELI OWENS • TE
So. • Alcoa, Tenn.
Ht.: 6-1 • Wt.: 244

- Saw time in two games as a freshman in 2025, maintaining his redshirt.
- Attended Alcoa High in Tennessee, which won state championships each season Owens played.
- Posted 315 receiving yards with 4 touchdowns in 2024, and also added 53 tackles, 12.5 tackles for loss, a sack, 8 pressures, 2 passes defended and a blocked punt.
- Had 35 catches for 415 yards and 8 touchdowns as a junior in 2023.
- Three-star prospect, No. 34 tight end in the country and No. 20 player in Tennessee, per Rivals Industry Ranking.

DEAKON TONIELLI • TE
Sr. • Oswego, Ill.
Ht.: 6-5 • Wt.: 246

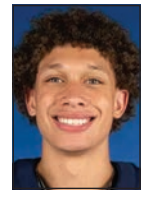


- Played in all 13 outings in 2025, making two starts at tight end and hauling in 8 receptions for 72 yards.
- Named Michigan's Most Improved Player on Special Teams and posted 2 tackles in 2025.
- Did not play in any games his freshman or sophomore seasons.
- Attended Oswego High, catching 42 passes for 550 yards and 5 TDs during his senior season.
- Caught 32 passes for 385 yards with 2 touchdowns during his junior campaign.
- Four-star prospect ranked as the 23rd-best tight end in the 2023 cycle per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Rec.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
2023	0/0	0	0	0	0
2024	0/0	0	0	0	0
2025	13/2	8	72	9.0	0
Total	**13/2**	**8**	**72**	**9.0**	**0**

NEWCOMER

MASON BONNER • TE
Fr. • Lakewood, Colo.
Ht.: 6-7 • Wt.: 225



- Caught 47 passes for 767 yards and 6 touchdowns as a senior at Mullen High School. On defense, he added 32 tackles with 8.5 for loss and 5 sacks, 4 pass breakups and 1 forced fumble.
- The three-star recruit was rated the No. 555 overall player and No. 32 tight end in the nation, according to the Rivals Industry Ranking.

O-LINE LEGACY

Blake Frazier Is Following In The Footsteps Of His Father, Steve, An All-American At Michigan

BY JOHN BORTON

They say coming to Michigan involves measuring oneself against the best. Blake Frazier can attest, wholeheartedly.

Michigan's projected starting left tackle, a 6-6, 295-pound junior out of Austin, Texas, enrolled at U-M early prior to his freshman season in 2024. The son of former Michigan offensive lineman Steve Frazier — part of the 1997 national championship crew — came ready to take on whatever charged at him.

His welcome to the Wolverines' offensive line arrived in the form of a 6-4, 315-pound, two-time All-America defensive tackle. Mason Graham doesn't play around — just ask Cleveland Browns opponents these days. In the spring of 2024, a rookie blocker didn't stand much of a chance, but saw his future chances enhanced mightily by taking on a stalwart from the 2023 national champs.

"Mason's one of the best players I've ever played against," Frazier acknowledged. "I came in as an early enrollee, undersized. He threw me around, for sure. But working against him on scout team, made me better. Those are the guys you want to compete against — the best."

Frazier will be staring down some of the Big Ten's — and the nation's — best this season, along with the rest of the Wolverines. Oklahoma, Indiana, Oregon, Ohio State — all are regarded as potential College Football Playoff teams. Throw in Iowa and Penn State, and it looks like a potential murderer's row. But the Wolverines are planning a little mayhem of their own, under new head coach Kyle Whittingham and the staff he largely brought east out of Utah.

If the Wolverines are going to be competitive in that sort of arena, it has to start up front on both lines. New offensive line coach Jim Harding has impressed many, including Frazier, to the point that they see an offensive front that will grow together throughout and be a force for Michigan.

"The day you come out thinking you can't be a dominant line means you're not going to be," Frazier asserted. "I absolutely believe this line can be the best line in college football this year. I think we have everything we need, and we have six guys who have started in a game here, at least. I think we can dominate."

If they do, and if the weapons he sees all around him are as legitimate as they appear, Frazier is ready for a season that could give his father some flashbacks. The younger Frazier isn't looking for a long break-in period for Whittingham, offensive coordinator Jason Beck, defensive coordinator Jay Hill and Harding.

"I want to win," Frazier asserted. "That's why I'm here. That's why I came back. I'm just excited to see how good this team can be. The new staff is unbelievable. The players we've got here are everything we need. I'm itching to get to the season."

A Natural Michigan Man

Steve Frazier put no pressure on his son to attend the school he eventually chose, Blake noted. Instead, Steve and wife Kim focused on raising a strong-minded son capable of making good decisions.

"My dad is my best friend," Blake Frazier noted. "I love that guy so much. He's done an unbelievable job. He hasn't really been — despite what some people think — a football coach to me. We'll watch film together once in a while, and he'll give me stats after games. But he's done a really good job of being more of a life coach for me. He just thinks about things in the right way and makes sure I'm not being a stupid college kid when it comes to certain situations.

"He grounds me. My mom as well. They make a great team, making sure I do the right things and I'm in the right spot."

That said, the winged helmet made an indelible impression on Blake at a very early age.

"My best experience was the first game I ever went to with my dad at The Big House," Frazier said. "I don't remember how old I was, but it was against San Diego State. It was just an unbelievable experience. I got to meet a bunch of my dad's old teammates, and put a face to the names I had grown up hearing about. I still talk to them — Glen Steele, Steve Hutchinson, Charles Woodson, Rob Swett, Ben Mast. I could go on and on.

"Those are guys I actually get to talk to pretty consistently, which is unbelievable. I don't think I understood how great some of those guys truly were. To me, they were my dad's friends. The fact that my dad thought they were cool, I thought they were cool."

Growing up in Texas, Frazier became a part of the phenomenon of prep football in the Lone Star State. Friday Night Lights, massive stadiums for high school ball, and the passion for the game held by so many remains overwhelming.

While the young Frazier embraced every bit of it, he wasn't awed to the point that he couldn't leave when it came time to do so.

"Texas high school football did me a

Frazier started eight games at left tackle in 2025 for a Michigan unit that was a semifinalist for the Joe Moore Award, given to the nation's top offensive line.

PHOTO BY TY KORNBLUE

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CITRUS BOWL

huge favor," he said. "We had spring ball down there. We're working out, 24/7. You're playing in front of at least 10,000 people every game. That was unbelievable and helped me prepare for coming up here.

"But I didn't feel that I had any obligation to stay in Texas, just because I lived there.

"Texas high school football did a great job of preparing me. But I didn't think I owed it anything, as far as staying in the state."

He wasn't a lock for Michigan, either, he pointed out.

"I wasn't necessarily a sure Michigan commit when I got that offer," Frazier confirmed. "I wanted to see everything. Do I think being a Michigan fan growing up influenced my decision to come here? Probably. But Michigan would have been a school I was heavily considering even if I hadn't grown up that way."

After two years in Ann Arbor — the latter seeing him take over as Michigan's left tackle midway last season — the big lineman hasn't a single regret about venturing to the land up north.

"It's been everything I expected and more," he said. "I remind myself every day, I'm living a dream. When those days get tough, I think about being a 7- or 8-year-old kid, rocking the Jordan shoes at school. There's a picture that goes around every once in a while of me wearing my dad's helmet. Stuff like that makes this such a cool experience for me."

Those Who Stay ...

Sometimes, of course, dreams take unexpected twists. While Frazier finished up high school with his classmates, Jim Harbaugh won a national championship with the Wolverines. Frazier came to Michigan under Harbaugh's handpicked successor, Sherrone Moore. Two years after that, Frazier found himself wrapping his mind around the fact that the head coach had fumbled himself out of a job, and mid-career Wolverines like himself were starting over.

Most say they at least looked around in the time of unsettledness and questioning, open to the idea of relocating if presented with a better situation. For Frazier, it wasn't a long look.

"Everybody knows what this school means to me," he said. "I wanted to be somebody that people knew was going to be on this team and looking forward to adapting to the new staff. If anybody had questions or concerns with everything that was going on — it was a big transition — I wanted to be somebody they could lean on.

"As soon as everything got settled and people were figuring out where they were going to be, I wanted to make sure I was one of those guys that was ready to come back and play.

"I think it would have been naive to have completely ruled out leaving, but it was never a heavy consideration of mine. Of course it was looked into, just because I needed to make sure I was going to be in the best position, and with an entire new staff, it's hard to know that for sure."

Asked again the why of it all, Frazier made certain to emphasize the intangibles, in addition to the status he's earned.

"Because it's Michigan," he said. "This is where I've wanted to be my entire life, and I am finally getting to be in the role I wanted, as a starting guy, I wanted to make sure I wasn't restarting that by going somewhere else. I've developed so many relationships here with teammates and staff that are still here. ... It was important to me to be one of those guys people could rely on."

Frazier insists his listed weight no longer applies. At the same time, he didn't give out a specific number in spring ball. Just know he's going to be able to move people this year, he implied.

"I've gained a lot of weight," he explained. "I'm not going to say a number. I've been talking with our nutrition staff. I like watching people on Twitter argue about whether I'm big enough or not. It's one of my biggest time-passers. I'm in a good spot. I was happy with it, and I'm as happy as I ever was.

"The big thing for me when I got here was just adding weight. I came in about 250 pounds, which is nowhere near big enough to play tackle. That was the biggest thing I had to do. My big focus on top of that was just not losing my edge. I pride myself on playing nasty. That's how I like to play. I tried to make sure with everything that was moving — learning a new offense, how to be in college — that wasn't something I lost. That was one of my biggest strengths."

Meanwhile his new head coach seemed happy — albeit not satisfied — with Michigan's offense coming out of spring football. The Wolverines experienced a full system reboot, with Whittingham coming out of the spring encouraged by much of what he witnessed.

"I think we're on track," Whittingham said. "We're not where we need to be ultimately, but I think we're on track and we've got a lot of opportunity ahead of us to get better.

"It was the same thing last year at Utah. We had the same exact situation where we installed an entirely new offense, and I would say we're right on par with where we need to be relative to what happened last year.

Top Father-Son Michigan Combos

The Fraziers, Steve and Blake, mark yet another father-son combination to have both started for Michigan. He's a look at some big-time legacies over the past 50 years.

- **Chris Hutchinson (1989-92) and Aidan Hutchinson (2018-2021)** — This duo features a pair of Michigan All-Americans. Both wore No. 97, with Chris recording 24 career sacks as a defensive tackle and Aidan posting 16.5 sacks as an edge rusher before moving on to star for the Detroit Lions.
- **Jon Runyan (1992-95) and Jon Runyan Jr. (2015-2019)** — Jon Sr. earned All-America honors at offensive tackle for the Wolverines. He went on to perform for 14 NFL seasons, making it to the Super Bowl twice. Jon Jr. also played offensive line, making first-team All-Big Ten twice and getting drafted by the Green Bay Packers.
- **Butch Woolfolk (1978-81) and Troy Woolfolk (2007-11)** — Butch Woolfolk rushed for 3,861 career yards for the Wolverines, the tailback recording a pair of 1,000-yard rushing seasons. His NFL career became shortened by injury. Troy Woolfolk racked up 90 tackles in 23 Michigan starts at cornerback and safety.
- **Stan Edwards (1977-81) and Braylon Edwards (2001-2004)** — Stan Edwards rushed for 2,206 career yards for Bo Schembechler's crew nearly 50 years ago. His son, Braylon, got off to a slow start at Michigan but became one of the most productive wideouts in the history of the Big Ten, with 252 receptions, 3,541 receiving yards and 39 touchdown grabs.

— John Borton

"We ended up with a really good offense last year. It was fourth in the nation in scoring [41.2 points per game average], second in rushing.

"No panic at all. We feel like we're headed in the right direction."

So does Frazier, who insisted the spring reassured him about Michigan's move forward.

"We're going to be explosive," he said. "We're going to move the ball in a bunch of different ways. If one thing is not working in one game, we'll figure out something else. But we're going to attack the defense in multiple ways, and they're not going to know what's going to hit them."

As noted, Frazier figures to be hitting them with even more force. He insists there wasn't a moment last year when everything began to click for him. He just realized more and more a sense of comfort on the field. His breakthrough game involved Michigan's 24-7 victory over Washington at home.

"I did a really good job of making sure I was prepared every game," he said. "It just happened to be Washington that I ended up in there. Being in the game consistently, things become a little bit slower, and you start to understand more of what's going on. I had been exposed to so many good players in practice and had gone through the game plan every week."

As a third-year Wolverine, Frazier noted: "My athleticism has been my strength, as long as I've been playing football. Quick feet, switching it up in pass pro, not letting the defensive end know what's coming. There are always things to improve on.

"It's understanding scheme, where I can lose a guy if I need to, and understanding what this new offense brings and the new opportunities for me as a player here."

"I'm just excited to see how good this team can be. The new staff is unbelievable. The players we've got here are everything we need."

FRAZIER

Michigan, he insists, will look for opportunities to climb the college football ladder once again — to the top rung.

"It's going to take everything we have," he said. "We have guys that want it. We have a staff that knows what they're doing and knows how to do it. At the end of the day, we've just got to stay consistent. I truly believe we have everything we need." ❑

Coming out of Austin (Texas) Vandegrift High, Frazier was rated as the nation's No. 164 prospect and No. 11 offensive tackle in the class of 2024.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

NEW BLOCKING BOSS

Jim Harding Expected To Lead Michigan's O-Line Resurgence

BY JOHN BORTON

Michigan's passing attack — including its pass blocking for rookie quarterback Bryce Underwood — wasn't where it needed to be a year ago. That affected the entire operation, Michigan backs finding themselves running into defenses stacked against the run.

New head coach Kyle Whittingham addressed hopes for a Michigan blocking upgrade this season. He assured he expected to see a quality line. Pressed for why, he didn't talk as much about the raw materials as he did the craftsman putting it all together.

"Jim Harding, our offensive line coach — there's no offensive line coach in the country better than him at developing talent," Whittingham said. "His track record speaks to that. He'll have two first-round draft choices this year, and so it's in good hands."

Whittingham made that statement prior to the NFL Draft, and he proved dead on. Utah's Spencer Fano

Junior Andrew Sprague started all 12 regular-season games at right tackle, earning honorable mention All-Big Ten recognition from the coaches and media.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Michigan's Ground Game In The Last Five Years

Season	Rushing Yards Per Game	National Rank
2025	210.2	14th
2024	157.2	73rd
2023	169.1	55th
2022	238.9	5th
2021	214.4	15th

[FYI]

- In 2025, both Michigan and Utah, where position coach Jim Harding led a strong unit, were semifinalists for the Joe Moore Award, presented to the best offensive line in the country. Iowa won the honor, which Michigan has taken home twice since it began in 2015 (2021, '22).
- Junior **Andrew Sprague**, who started 12 games at right tackle last season, graded out as the Wolverines' best offensive lineman in 2025, according to Pro Football Focus, with a 72.6 overall rating. He posted marks of 71.0 in pass protection and 69.9 in run blocking.
- Michigan ranked 21st nationally in run blocking (70.9) and tied 71st in pass blocking (67.4) last season, according to PFF.
- Sophomore **Andrew Babalola**, who missed his freshman season with a knee injury suffered in a preseason practice, was a five-star prospect and the nation's No. 16 overall prospect per the Rivals Industry Ranking, making him the program's highest-ranked offensive line recruit of the Rivals era (since 2004).
- **Jim Harding** checked in No. 3 in Roc Boys Football's rankings of the top offensive line coaches in the country, behind only Miami's Alex Mirabal and Notre Dame's Joe Rudolph.

OFFENSIVE LINEMEN

65	Andrew Babalola (6-6, 315), So.
60	Brooks Bahr (6-5, 312), Sr.
76	Manuel Beigel (6-5, 312), Jr.
55	Nathan Efobi (6-3, 312), Sr.
—	Tommy Fraumann (6-8, 265), Fr.
77	Blake Frazier (6-6, 295), Jr.
74	Avery Gach (6-5, 308), So.
53	Jake Guarnera (6-4, 311), Jr.
52	Ace Hamilton (6-3, 295), Fr.
50	Luke Hamilton (6-5, 319), Jr.
67	Houston Ka'aha'aina-Torres (6-3, 300), So.
—	Malakai Lee (6-7, 350), Fr.
71	Evan Link (6-6, 324), Sr.
70	Brady Norton (6-4, 312), Sr.
54	Andrew Sprague (6-8, 315), Jr.
78	Marky Walbridge (6-6, 285), Fr.

became the No. 9 overall pick of the draft, taken in the first round by the Cleveland Browns. Then the New England Patriots took Caleb Lomu later in that opening round at No. 28 overall. Harding, Michigan's assistant head coach as well as offensive line coach, posted his crowning achievement after 24 years in the business, the last dozen with Utah.

"He's a good teacher," offered former Michigan offensive tackle Jon Jansen, a two-time captain, two-time All-American, national champion and veteran of a decade in the NFL. "I like the techniques that he's teaching. There are a lot of bad habits that he's got to break, so it's going to take some time. There were some good things and some bad things in the spring game, but none of them will be a surprise to him.

"He knew going in that there is still a lot of work to do. But I like how he coaches the guys, how he teaches them. I like how he teaches the techniques. The track record is, Jim Harding is a really good offensive line coach. I don't expect that to change."

Coming out of spring football, the starting offensive line appeared to be as follows: junior Blake Frazier (6-6, 295) at left tackle; senior Nathan Efobi (6-3, 312) at left guard; junior Jake Guarnera (6-4, 311) at center; senior Brady Norton (6-4, 312) at right guard; and junior Andrew Sprague (6-8, 315) at right tackle. Together, and with better depth this season, they ought to form a more formidable crew than the Wolverines featured in 2025, Jansen explained.

"I 100 percent believe that," Jansen said, regarding expectations for at least an above-average Michigan offensive line. "Some of that is just because you've got three returning starters, in Blake, Sprague at right tackle, and Jake at the center position — which I think is an upgrade over Crip [Greg Crippen]. I love Crip, but Jake is just definitely an upgrade."

"Sprague had a really good spring. He's taken steps in the right direction. Frazier put the feedbag on. He's going to be a little bit heavier, a little bit thicker, and there's the upgrade at the center position. In that regard, they'll be above average.

"You look at the guard position and Efobi's got some experience there, and certainly he's got some talent. I think he will be a big beneficiary of having Jim Harding as his offensive line coach. Brady Norton — how does he figure into things? And [6-5, 308-pound sophomore Avery] Gach had a good spring. I think the unit will be above average, and by the end of the year, it should be well above that."

X-FACTOR

Sophomore **ANDREW BABALOLA** was competing for the starting left tackle job in 2025 fall camp before sustaining a season-ending ACL injury. Now that he's expected to be fully healthy, he should be a major factor on the line, whether that's attaining a starting spot or serving as the jumbo tight end position that offensive coordinator Jason Beck calls "rhino."

Veterans To Step Up

Jansen puts plenty of confidence in the trio of returning starters for the Wolverines. Frazier, Guarnera and Sprague need to be rock solid for the Wolverines to be what they want up front, and the former All-American anticipates they will be.

THEY SAID IT

"He's been with me for over a decade and has produced a solid offensive line every single year. I don't think this year is going to be any different."

— Head coach Kyle Whittingham on offensive line coach Jim Harding

"There's a natural progression," he said. "Those guys are going to be much more comfortable having experienced everything they experienced last year. By default, when you've done it, you've seen it, you know what works, what doesn't work. That is going to be an advantage to them, and I think they'll improve.

"Now you throw on top of that a coach who is technique-driven — and it's every single technique. It's not just in the pass pro. It's in the run game. It's all the little things. When a certain play is called, it's anticipating defensive movement and where you put your hat on this type of play. How you help your partner. That's the next step for those three guys.

"It's 'OK, now that I've got myself taken care of, with things I'm going to work on and get better at, how do I help my guard as a tackle? How do I help my tight end as a tackle? As a center, what can I be doing to help both guards, as far as being vocal in that center position. That's where these players are really going to take the next step."

Norton is a leading candidate to grab the position at right guard, but he'll get pushed by Gach. Jansen noted that for Norton, a summer weight build-up wouldn't hurt.

"Brady is just a tremendous athlete," Jansen said. "He needs to get a little heavier to play that guard position. He's a smart kid, he's aggressive, he's got experience at both positions."

Regarding Gach, Jansen likes his mentality. "He's got to get a grasp of the offense, but his approach to the game is going to lend itself to him being a really good guard. It's his aggressive style, his nature of wanting to seek out violence that's really going to help him."

Michigan's line could feature a pair of very large wild cards. Senior Evan Link

QUICK FACTS

Position Coach: Jim Harding (1st year at U-M)

Returning Starters: Jake Guarnera (11 career starts), Blake Frazier (8), Andrew Sprague (13)

Departing Starters: Greg Crippen (21), Giovanni El-Hadi (25)

Projected New Starters: Evan Link (18), Nathan Efobi (5) or Brady Norton (3)

Top Reserves: Andrew Babalola, Houston Ka'aha'aina-Torres

Newcomers: Tommy Fraumann, Ace Hamilton, Malakai Lee, Marky Walbridge

Moved In: Ka'aha'aina-Torres (Nebraska)

Moved Out: Ty Haywood (Alabama), Connor Jones (Georgia State), Kaden Strayhorn (Alabama)

Rookie Impact: None

Most Improved Player: Blake Frazier

Best Pro Prospect: Andrew Babalola

(6-6, 324) played tackle and started seven games last year, but could provide a strong challenge at one of the guard positions. And five-star recruit Andrew Babalola (6-6, 315) injured a knee last fall and missed out on his entire freshman season. Jansen noted that both could play a huge part in what the Wolverines look like up front.

"Link can play inside, absolutely," he said. "We saw him play on the outside, and he had his limitations, but there are some things he did well. All the things he did well — blocking a five-technique in pass protection — will he get that at the guard position, blocking a three-technique? Yeah. Run blocking — will he be able to have road-grader moments? Yeah. Can he do that as a guard? Yup. Is he going to have to block a wide nine and set back and out? No, and that's one of the things he struggled at.

"You're taking away a lot of the things that he struggled at, but he's also going to have some new things. Can he pull? Is he going to be able to get around, get his shoulders square? Those are new things that aren't difficult to learn. He should do just fine. I think it's a great move for him, going to that guard position."

Babalola became the talk of the young Michigan offensive linemen early, because of his size and aggression. The question now becomes how well will he perform when thrown in the fall camp fire?

"What do they do when Babalola is healthy, and he's out there producing?" Jansen mused. "We have no idea where he'll be come fall. He doesn't have any games under his belt, and he doesn't have any regular-season practices under his belt. He had, what, 15 practices last year in the spring and a handful in the fall. Where is he at? If he's back to where we anticipated he would be as a recruit, what do you do with him?

"You want your best five guys out there. Do you put him at one of the tackle positions and bump a guy down? Do you put him at a guard position? Those things still need to be worked out."

A pair of freshmen will provide depth, Ace Hamilton (6-3, 295) at guard and Marky Walbridge (6-6, 285) at tackle.

"I was really impressed with both of the freshmen," Jansen noted. "Ace bends well. He's got good balance, he picks up concepts. His footwork still needs work, but he does things in those regards naturally, coming in as a freshman. I could cut and paste the same thing with Marky Walbridge. There are some things he does naturally coming in — balance, hand placement, understanding where to put his helmet and hands — that I think are going to serve him well as a freshman."

Senior Brooks Bahr (6-5, 312) can play the role of Swiss army knife along the front line, according to the two-time Michigan captain.

"He needs to be a swing guy," Jansen said. "He'll back up all four positions besides center. It's going to be a matter of, how much does he understand at each position? He's going to be one of those guys who creates really good depth on the offensive line."

Freshman Malakai Lee (6-7, 350) will also provide depth at tackle, while junior Luke Hamilton (6-5, 319) will do the same at guard. Guarnera will be backed up by sophomore Houston Ka'aha'aina-Torres (6-3, 300), along with Ace Hamilton and Gach. ❑

Senior Brady Norton is the leading candidate coming out of spring practice for the starting role at right guard. He started three games at that position last season.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

PRESEASON ANALYSIS

STARTERS ★★★

Michigan features three returning starters — juniors Blake Frazier and Andrew Sprague at left and right tackle, respectively, and junior Jake Guarnera at center, moved in from guard last year. That's a solid start to any lineup. As of spring, it appeared seniors Nathan Efobi and Brady Norton were top challengers for the guard positions, but that could be in flux, depending on injury returnees. Either way, new offensive line coach Jim Harding will be looking to move this group forward, especially in pass protection.

DEPTH ★★★

One can call senior Evan Link and sophomore Andrew Babalola "depth," but they could be starters, depending upon their continued bounce back from injury. Link started seven games at left tackle last year, and has been spoken of by insiders as a candidate to move to one of the guard spots. Babalola was a five-star prep who tore an ACL and missed his rookie season, but he has tremendous potential. Sophomore Avery Gach and several others provide decent depth on this squad.

OVERALL ★★★

Can this group develop together and effectively pave the way for the Wolverines in 2026? Those close to it who know offensive line play say yes, especially with Harding delivering the instruction and technique that helped two of his Utah blockers become NFL first-rounders this spring. Next to sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood's development, this group's push to become a dominant line is the offense's most crucial.

Junior Jake Guarnera started 11 games at right guard last year but will shift over and anchor the line at center this season. He earned honorable mention All-Big Ten from coaches and media in 2025.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

POSITION COACH

Jim Harding is in his first season at Michigan, serving as assistant head coach and offensive line coach. He's spent the last 17 years as an offensive line coach, including 12 at Utah from 2014-15.

Harding has sent 15 offensive linemen to the NFL, including eight draft picks, highlighted by first-rounders in Garrett Bolles (No. 20 to the Denver Broncos) in 2017 and Spencer Fano (No. 9 to the Cleveland Browns) and Caleb Lomu (No. 28 to the New England Patriots) in 2026.

In 2025, Utah led the nation with 6 yards per rush attempt and was 11th with only 14 sacks allowed, with Harding's position group being named a semifinalist for the Joe Moore Award.

Under his direction, 11 players achieved first-team All-Pac 12 or All-Big 12 honors, including Fano as the 2025 Big 12 Offensive Lineman of the Year. Fano became the Utes' first Outland Trophy winner in 2025 and earned consensus first-team All-America honors after picking up second-team recognition in 2024.

Harding's offensive lines blocked for a 1,000-yard rusher in eight of 12 seasons during his time in Salt Lake City, including a stretch of six straight seasons with a 1,000-yard rusher (2014-19).

Prior to working for head coach Kyle Whittingham at Utah, Harding was the offensive line coach at Wyoming from 2009-13. He began coaching in college at Missouri as a gradu-

No Lack Of Optimism

Some wondered how Michigan could win nine football games last season, given the chaos unveiled shortly after the regular season ended. But they did, and with the decks clear going forward, many are seeing a brighter future for the Wolverines, starting up front on the offensive line.

Following the spring game, Whittingham reiterated his stance on Harding and his confidence in the coach's ability to turn out an upgraded product.

"I think the O-line is going to be fine once all's said and done," Whittingham claimed. "Jim Harding is a proven commodity as an offensive line coach. He's been with me for over a decade and has produced a solid offensive line every single year. I don't think this year is going to be any different.

"We had two or three guys that were very limited or out this spring that are going to be very prominent in the fall, pushing for starting jobs.

"I don't have a big concern about it, because I know Jim Harding's track record, I know the talent level of the players that we've got there and the guys that are going to be joining us coming off injury. I think we're going to be solid once we get into the season."

Whittingham also served up praise for offensive coordinator Jason Beck, whom he noted has a knack for playing to the strengths of his personnel.

"Jason Beck is also very adept at, if you have weaknesses, covering them up and doing things that they can take the focus off of that," Whittingham said. "Between those two guys and their ability to teach and scheme, I think we're going to be just fine."

Junior Blake Frazier — expected to serve as Michigan's starting left tackle come fall — shared in the feeling that the Wolverines are definitely headed in the right direction up front, led by Harding.

"I love him," Frazier said of the new boss. "He's somebody who is very adaptive. He works with me, [Andrew] Sprague, Jake [Guarnera]. He gives us all different tools to work with, because we all play a little bit differently. He's been unbelievable in coming in and introducing the new scheme to us. We keep a lot of our on-field calls the same, just to ease the transition. I'm super excited to keep working with him. His track record speaks for itself.

"We were lucky enough to keep more of our guys than we lost. Of the units on the team, we kept most of us together. Towards the end of the season, especially, we were starting to become a family.

"The fact that we kept as many guys as we did really helped us. The Joe Moore [Award, for the nation's best offensive line] is the goal. You come to Michigan as an offensive lineman, that's what you're aiming for. We're in a really good spot right now, and I'm excited to see how we keep developing."

— John Borton

ate assistant from 2002-04, before serving as the defensive coordinator (2005-07) and head coach (2008) at Troy Athens High School in Michigan.

A Maumee, Ohio, native, Harding played offensive line at Toledo, where he was a first-team All-MAC selection and captain in 2000 for a team that finished the regular season No. 25 in the Associated Press poll.

RETURNING PLAYERS

ANDREW BABALOLA • OT
So. • Overland Park, Kan.
Ht.: 6-6 • Wt.: 315

- Enrolled at U-M in January 2025.
- Missed his freshman season with a torn ACL suffered in fall camp.
- Highest-rated recruit from Kansas since 2009, according to MaxPreps.
- Five-star prospect rated as the No. 16 prospect overall and the No. 3 offensive tackle nationally and the top-ranked player in Kansas in the Rivals Industry Ranking.

BROOKS BAHR • OG
Sr. • Lake Forest, Ill.
Ht.: 6-5 • Wt.: 312

- Logged snaps in two games in 2025 and was named Scout Team Offensive Player of the Week against Central Michigan and Northwestern.
- Did not see game action in 2023 or 2024.
- Switched from defensive line before 2024 season.
- Combined for 95 tackles, 15 tackles for loss, 5 sacks and a forced fumble in his junior and senior seasons at Loyola Academy.
- Tabbed as a three-star recruit and the 12th-best player in Illinois in the 2023 class, per Rivals Industry Ranking.

MANUEL BEIGEL • OL
Jr. • Frankfurt, Germany
Ht.: 6-5 • Wt.: 312

- Switched from defensive tackle to offensive line in spring 2026.
- Appeared in one game while redshirting in 2024 and seven in 2025, recording 1 tackle as a sophomore.
- Attended high school at Choate Rosemary Hall in Connecticut in 2022 and 2023 after coming to the United States.

Seniors Evan Link (71) and Nathan Efobi (55) are the top two on the depth chart at left guard entering fall camp. Link has started 18 career games at tackle, while Efobi has five starts at guard.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

- A three-star recruit, the No. 870 overall recruit and No 82 defensive lineman in the country, according to the Rivals Industry Ranking.

NATHAN EFOBI • OG
Sr. • Atlanta
Ht.: 6-3 • Wt.: 312

- Played in 13 outings in 2025 with five starts (all at left guard), posting a 66.9 overall PFF rating.
- Appeared in six games with an appearance at left guard in 2024.
- Redshirted his freshman season in 2023.
- Voted team captain during senior season at South Forsyth High.
- Part of a team that went to the Region 6 Class 7A state title game during his junior year.
- Two-time first-team Region 6-7A All-Region selection as a prep.
- Also played defensive line and lettered in track and field, finishing fourth in the shot put at the 2022 Georgia 7A championship meet with a throw of 52 feet, 8.75 inches.
- Four-star recruit, No. 117 player and 10th-ranked interior offensive lineman in the 2023 class, according to On3.

BLAKE FRAZIER • OT
Jr. • Austin, Texas
Ht.: 6-6 • Wt.: 295

- Played in all 13 contests with eight starts (six at left tackle and two in an extra lineman package) in 2025, registering a 64.4 overall PFF rating.
- Did not see game action in 2024.
- Unanimous selection as the Texas 25-6A All-District Offensive Lineman of the Year and member of Dave Campbell's Texas Football Whataburger Super Team as a prep senior.
- Son of former U-M center Steve Frazier, a 1997 national champion who played for the Wolverines from 1995-99.
- Regarded as a four-star prospect and the nation's No. 164 overall player in the 2024 class, per the Rivals Industry Ranking. Also checked in as the No. 11 offensive tackle nationally and 27th-best recruit in Texas.

AVERY GACH • OG
So. • Franklin, Mich.
Ht: 6-5 • Wt.: 308

- Enrolled at U-M in January 2025 and appeared in five games on special teams, including the Citrus Bowl vs. Texas, while preserving his redshirt during his freshman campaign.
- First-ever two-time captain under head coach Brendan Flaherty (25 years) during

junior and senior seasons at Wylie E. Groves HS and was a four-year starter at tackle.
- Made the 2023 Detroit Free Press and Detroit News Dream Teams.
- Four-star signee, No. 304 player nationally, No. 20 interior offensive lineman and fourth-best player in Michigan, per Rivals Industry Ranking.

JAKE GUARNERA • C
Jr. • Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.
Ht.: 6-4 • Wt.: 311

- Played in 11 outings with 11 starts at right guard in 2025, leading the team's interior offensive linemen with a 71.3 PFF grade.
- Named honorable mention All-Big Ten by the coaches and media.
- Appeared in five games on special teams in 2024.
- Under Armour All-American Game participant in 2023.
- Rivals Industry Ranking listed him as a three-star recruit and the No. 472 player and No. 40 interior offensive lineman in the class, along with the 59th-best player in Florida.

LUKE HAMILTON • OG
Jr. • Avon, Ohio
Ht.: 6-5 • Wt.: 319

- Did not see game action in 2024.
- Tallied a 48-7 high school record over four seasons on varsity, including a 14-1 mark in 2023 that set the program's record for wins.
- Named the Division II Co-Offensive Player of the Year in 2023 by the Ohio High School Athletic Association.
- Honored as All-Southwestern Conference Lineman of the Year as a senior.
- A two-time first-team all-state selection in 2022 and '23.
- The three-star recruit was slotted by the Rivals Industry Ranking as the No. 464 overall player and No. 37 interior offensive lineman in the country and 17th-best prospect in Ohio in 2024.

EVAN LINK • OT
Sr. • Burke, Va.
Ht.: 6-6 • Wt.: 324

- Opened seven games at left tackle to begin the season before going down with an injury against Washington in October 2025.
- Recorded a 63.3 overall PFF grade.
- Appeared in 13 games with 11 consecutive starts (10 at right tackle, one at left) in 2024.
- Redshirted and did not play in any games in 2023.
- Attended Gonzaga College High in Washington, D.C., where he was a two-time first-team Washington Post All-Metro selection (2021-22).
- First-team Virginia Class AA all-state selection as a junior (2021).
- On3 rating of four stars, ranked as No. 124 prospect in the nation, No. 9 offensive tackle and No. 2 player in the District of Columbia.

BRADY NORTON • OT
Sr. • Mission Viejo, Calif.
Ht.: 6-4 • Wt.: 312

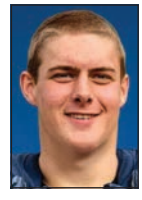
- Saw action in seven games with three starts at right guard (New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas) in his first season with the Wolverines in 2025.
- Enrolled at U-M in January 2025, after two years at Cal Poly.
- Appeared in 15 games with 11 starts in his Mustangs career, earning FCS Football Central Freshman All-American in 2024.
- Allowed 0 sacks and 3 total pressures on 444 pass blocking reps in 2024.
- Appeared in four games, preserving his redshirt, during the 2023 season.
- Attended Mission Viejo High, also playing rugby.

ANDREW SPRAGUE • OT
Jr. • Kansas City, Mo.
Ht.: 6-8 • Wt.: 315

- Started all 12 regular-season games at right tackle, earning honorable mention All-Big Ten recognition from the coaches and media.
- Led the U-M offensive line with a 72.6 overall PFF grade.
- Appeared in four games and made one start (vs. Alabama) at right tackle in 2024.
- Selected to the 2024 NBC Sports All-American Bowl
- Was named to the Class 6 Missouri All-State first team in both 2022 and 2023.
- The No. 107 overall player in the 2024 class was a four-star recruit, the No. 7 offensive tackle in the nation and the fifth-best prospect in Missouri, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

NEWCOMERS

TOMMY FRAUMANN • OT
Fr. • Wilmette, Ill.
Ht: 6-8 • Wt.: 265



- The three-star prospect checked in as the No. 718 player and No. 57 offensive tackle in the country, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.
- Father, Bob Fraumann, was a linebacker (1997-2000) for Michigan and his mother, Katie Fraumann, is a former basketball player (1998-2001) and athletics administrator at U-M.

ACE HAMILTON • OG
Fr. • Clinton, Md.
Ht: 6-3 • Wt.: 295

- Adrian "Ace" Hamilton enrolled early at Michigan.
- Three-time All-Washington (D.C.) Catholic Athletic Conference selection in 2023 (honorable mention), 2024 (second team) and 2025 (first team)
- Ranked No. 625 overall and the No. 57 interior offensive lineman nationally, Hamilton was a three-star prospect per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

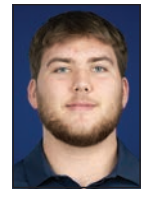
HOUSTON KA'AHA'AINA-TORRES • C
So. • Waimanalo, Hawai'i
Ht: 6-3 • Wt.: 300

- Spent one season at Nebraska before transferring to Michigan in January 2026.
- Appeared in two games while redshirting for the Cornhuskers.
- Selected to play in the 2025 Polynesian Bowl.
- Three-star prospect, the No. 640 overall player and No. 54 interior offensive lineman in the nation in the 2025 class, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

MALAKAI LEE • OT
Fr. • Kaneohe, Hawai'i
Ht: 6-7 • Wt.: 350

- Gatorade Player of the Year in Hawai'i, 2026 Navy All-American Bowl participant and 2025 Polynesian Bowl All-Star.
- Great uncle, Chris Faumatu-Ma'afala, played fullback in the NFL for the Pittsburgh Steelers and Jacksonville Jaguars.
- Rated as a four-star, the No. 55 overall player and No. 8 offensive tackle in the nation in the 2026 class, per Rivals.

MARKY WALBRIDGE • OT
Fr. • Hanover, Mass.
Ht: 6-6 • Wt.: 285



- Enrolled early in January 2026.
- The four-star slotted No. 247 overall and No. 18 among interior offensive linemen in the 2026 class, according to the Rivals Industry Ranking.

A NEW MINISTER OF DEFENSE

Q&A With Michigan Defensive Coordinator Jay Hill

BY CHRIS BALAS

Jay Hill had an idea what the call was about before he even picked up the phone in late January. The BYU defensive coordinator's friend and former coach and boss, Kyle Whittingham, was on the other end of the line, having just left Utah for the Michigan head coaching job.

Hill was the defensive coordinator at BYU from 2023-25 and previously head coach at Weber State, where he led the Wildcats to the FCS playoffs in six of nine seasons.

PHOTO COURTESY MGOBLUE TV

DEFENSE Q&A

"I said 'Yes' before he even asked the question," Hill quipped to a group of donors at an event in Ann Arbor shortly after his arrival.

That question, of course, was, "Would you leave BYU to become my defensive coordinator at Michigan?"

"The Michigan brand, the Michigan name, being able to recruit in that logo was a big deal to me," Hill said. "They just won a national championship a couple years ago with one of the best teams in the history of college football. The ability to do that, to do it on the Big Ten stage was appealing, and to do it with the players that I knew were coming back to this place."

But Whittingham might have been the biggest reason of all. Hill talked about his relationship with the coach and more in this exclusive Q&A.

***The Wolverine*: When Kyle Whittingham was announced as the Michigan coach, did you expect a phone call from him asking you to join him?**

Jay Hill: "I had an idea. You hear rumors and rumblings. I knew he'd retired and knew the Michigan job was open. It did cross my mind if this happens, is it something I would do? Yeah.

"At the same time, I had a job to do where I was [at BYU]. I had to get that done and do it well."

***The Wolverine*: How much of coming to Ann Arbor was following Coach, and how much was it "because it's Michigan?"**

Hill: "It was both, 100 percent. It had to be Coach Whitt, and there were only a couple jobs that could have lured me away from the one I had, because it was such a good job.

"But Michigan coupled with Coach Whitt was something I can get behind. I believed big time in that."

***The Wolverine*: What makes Coach Whittingham a good fit at Michigan, and why are you so convinced he'll be successful here?**

Hill: "His toughness, his discipline. I think he's a perfect fit for what Michigan football's always been known to be.

"Coach Whitt is that exact personality. He instills toughness; he instills discipline and culture. He recruits players that do things right. All those things are exactly what Michigan needed, in my opinion."

***The Wolverine:* How have you acclimated to Ann Arbor, and have you had time to enjoy it at all?**

Hill: "I haven't been here long, but every day I love it more and more. I like the city; I like the restaurants. I've just started to hit some of the golf courses, but I really like Ann Arbor. It's a cool place.

"We [coaches] can usually slip out a little bit in the evening in June, and then July. We don't get a lot of time to golf. Hopefully, I get to see more of the good courses here."

***The Wolverine:* What were your impressions of your defensive position coaches this spring?**

Hill: "I love my assistant coaches. I knew when I took the job that there was

a good chance to get [defensive ends] coach [Lewis] Powell coming from Utah with Coach Whittingham. I'd worked with Coach Powell before and knew him because we played together. That was a great hire.

"Then, I love [linebackers coach] Alex Whittingham and his background, just having been with the Kansas City Chiefs the last eight years. I know how that family operates and works in the sport of football, and I thought that was an awesome hire."

***The Wolverine:* Which coaches did you suggest to Coach Whittingham that you advocated for?**

Hill: "The ones I had 100 percent full say in — and I had a say in all of them — but the ones that were hired just from me and Coach Whitt collaborating were [safeties coach] Tyler Stockton and [cornerbacks coach] Jernaro Gilford. I had heard great things about Tyler, and I knew the Boise [State] people loved him. He took one of the kids I had recruited and really turned him into a phenomenal player. Tyler Stockton was a big addition.

"Jernaro, having worked with him the last three years ... BYU is a place where when I got there, the corner group was strong. He had done a great job recruiting them and developing them. That was actually a strength at BYU. Being able to bring Coach Gilford with me was a no-brainer.

"Espo [former U-M defensive line coach Lou Esposito] was here at the time, and I loved Espo. He was a great dude, but you can't fault him for wanting to go to the NFL. When he did, the first name that came up was Larry Black. I had multiple people reach out and say, 'If you can get him, he is the best of the best.' So, I called Coach Black, but we just didn't know if we could work it out with contracts and all the other things that were going on, but we did. And he's phenomenal.

"This is a rock star staff. I would put them up with anyone anywhere in the country. I just think they are phenomenal. They're the best of the best. They could coach anywhere."

***The Wolverine*: You played defense for Coach Whittingham. How did you develop your defensive philosophy over the years, and did it start with him? How has it evolved?**

Hill: "It started with Coach Whitt and his dad [Fred]. I played for Kyle. He was the D.C., and his dad was a critical piece to our defense and just where that philosophy was. It's definitely evolved. Coach Whitt evolved it from his dad. The next coordinator, Gary Andersen, put his flavor on it, and the next guy, Kalani Sitake, put his flavor on it.

"It's evolved a little bit, but the roots are exactly the same. I've tweaked and changed and put a little of my personality on it, as well. I think you have to do that to be successful. It has to fit you. You can't be robotic and just call it like the other guys. You have to call it like you see it.

"I liked the additions we made to it at BYU. We added a little bit more odd front, probably played a little more two-high safety stuff at times in different game plans. The bottom line — we tweaked and changed it a little bit, and I think it was a good thing for us."

***The Wolverine*: What were your first impressions of the talent you inherited on defense when you saw them put on the pads?**

Hill: "I knew Michigan would have talent. That was a big reason I was willing to come. Once you see it in person, then it becomes something more real.

"I was impressed, especially with certain guys. I can't say across the board, 'We've got 15 NFL guys.' I don't think anywhere you go is like that. But I can say I was very impressed with the caliber of person they had, the caliber of player they had. We have great kids at the University of Michigan. *Great*. That was very evident to me early, early in this transition."

***The Wolverine:* Two of your star players, edge John Henry Daley and safety Rod Moore, are coming back from serious injuries. Where are they in their recoveries, and will they be good to go this fall?**

Hill: "Right now, they're for sure on track. They were both in our run [June 9] and looked good. But we've got to be smart with those guys. They're coming off some pretty substantial injuries. What we're not going to do is be dumb at this stage [and overwork them].

"But we do need to be working them back into the fold. Where they are now is very, very promising, and a great sign." ❑

Hill was a standout cornerback for Utah while Kyle Whittingham was the Utes' defensive coordinator and later coached under him for 12 seasons in Salt Lake City.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

THE FOUNDATION UP FRONT

Defensive Tackle Trey Pierce Is Prepared To Meet His Lofty Potential

BY CHRIS BALAS

The 2025 season wasn't exactly a memorable one for the Michigan football team, a 9-4 campaign in which the Wolverines lost every big game on the schedule. It was paradise, though, compared to what happened in the weeks that followed the loss to Ohio State — the program's first in five games — and preceding a Citrus Bowl loss to Texas.

First, there were rumors that several of U-M's best players might opt out of the bowl game. Cooler heads prevailed, but some key players entered the transfer portal, including senior defensive tackle Enow Etta. If they couldn't convince him to come back, many surmised that Michigan would have its worst defensive line in recent memory, or at the very least its most inexperienced.

But those staffers who remained after Sherrone Moore's abrupt firing knew they had at least one ace up their sleeve in Trey Pierce. An honorable mention All-Big Ten selection in 2025 after notching 30 tackles, the 6-foot-2, 310-pounder had gotten better and better as a junior, especially against the run, and everyone said the same thing:

"He's capable of even more. *Much* more," just like many of his teammates on the D-line.

So, it was a bit surprising when new coach Kyle Whittingham announced after spring ball that the defensive line would be one of the team's strengths this fall based on what he'd seen, even after they'd convinced Etta to return.

It wasn't as unforeseen to defensive coordinator Jay Hill. His offseason homework consisted of watching film on each of his inherited players, and what he saw from Pierce was exactly what he saw this spring ... but even better.

"There are plenty of intangibles he has," Hill said. "He plays with great pad level. He's hard to knock off the ball, and he's a block eater. He makes plays. He's been just one of my favorites. I love him."

Just as former Michigan defensive line coach Lou Esposito did after he inherited the Chicago area lineman. Though he left for the NFL's Baltimore Ravens, Esposito, father of 2027 offensive line pledge Louis Esposito, had two years with Pierce, watching him grow from a three-star prep with high upside into one of the Big Ten's more physical defensive tackles.

Pierce started all 13 games a year ago and has appeared in 26 others in his three years. His overall defensive run grade is the best among all returning Michigan defenders, per analytics site Pro Football Focus, and is higher than Michigan's lone interior transfer addition this offseason, senior Jonah Lea'ea.

The senior also played more than 400 defensive snaps last season and graded out as one of Michigan's highest-rated returning defenders overall. Only Rayshaun Benny was better among Michigan defensive tackles.

Esposito had a hand in his development, so he was like a proud papa when he saw Pierce in practices this spring.

"I was able to see him a few times, and he looked really, really good," Esposito praised. "His block destruction and his ability to sustain ... and when I say sustain, his conditioning, his ability to really focus in and be laser-focused on certain

Pierce was one of four spring captains, as voted by his teammates.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

things that help his game out.

"Then, obviously, his leadership. He's become a great leader. To become voted captain in the spring, it's a huge accomplishment for him and his family. It's going to be an exciting year for him."

Especially if he can get to the quarterback a bit more. Pierce's strength last year came in stopping the run, and he figures to be even better this year. New strength coach Doug Elisaia and his staff have made him even thicker and stronger, and he's even harder to move.

But another part of the strength and conditioning program is improving agility, and that's where Esposito noticed the biggest improvement. Instead of just holding his ground and taking up space, Pierce was able to get a jump on offensive linemen with his athleticism.

"The thing that jumped out [was] his ability to twitch up. It looks like he plays a little bouncier," Esposito said. "He's maturing. His body … I'm not going to say he's now in shape, because he's always been in shape. But he's grown into his body and is becoming more mature.

"I noticed a bounce in his step, and his quick twitch really showed up in a couple practices I was at."

That raises Pierce's ceiling tremendously. Between him and the 6-5, 320-pound Etta on the interior, the Wolverines now have two tackles who should be among the best in the conference.

Pierce, though, is the cornerstone, a big reason he was one of the priorities for the new staff. Esposito undoubtedly let them know it in the few months he served under Whittingham, and they've now seen it for themselves.

"I think he can be great," Esposito said.

Pierce started all 13 games in 2025, earning honorable mention All-Big Ten honors after notching 30 tackles.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

"He's an unbelievable run stopper, continues to grow with pass rush moves. I'm sure with what coach [Larry] Black and [assistant line coach David] Denham will teach him, the sky is the limit for him.

"He's extremely strong. I think that's going to help him progress to the next level. He should have a really, really breakout year. The biggest thing is just his ability to hold the point and play with knock-back. He does a great job playing with his hands and leverage. I feel like he got better last year, and I can only imagine he's going to progress this year, too, with what they've got going on there."

One Last Dance

What they've got going on is momentum with a new coaching staff that Hill insisted would match up well with any in the country. It starts at the top with Whittingham, who Pierce said on the "In the Trenches" podcast this spring is "all ball."

New defensive line coach Larry Black is similar, arriving from Vanderbilt to make an immediate impression. Esposito was one of the Wolverines' better assistants, but Black has kept the momentum going at the position.

Both Whittingham and Black have made their impact on the defensive tackle room, Pierce praised.

"He says it every time I talk to him — 'I'm family and football,' and he means it," Pierce said of his new head coach. "He moves like that, carries himself that way. I don't think I've met too many people that focused.

"[Black] has this thing he says — he's a 'high-care cat.' He's fired up every single day, comes in, brings energy every day. I'm glad he's here, because he's been teaching us some good stuff."

Not everyone is convinced, though, that the defensive line will be good enough to compete for championships. Even after Whittingham announced the unit was one of the best groups on the team this spring, detractors took to social media to call it "coach speak" or worse, questioning whether the Wolverines had the horses up front.

Depth is still somewhat a question mark given the lack of experience behind Pierce and Etta, but those two could be — probably should be — as good a pair as there is in the Big Ten if they play to their potential. Assistant coaches Black and Denham helped elevate their play this spring, and both should have their best seasons in a Michigan uniform.

Pierce is eager to prove the doubters wrong.

"I know you're not supposed to do this, but I go online, I go on Twitter and see things like, 'Our interior D-line needs help,'" Pierce admitted. "For me, I take that as a personal slight because I've been here four years. I played all four years, and I see the work we put in behind the scenes.

"I think it's just going to make us go harder. We're going to show that we are a strength of this team. We always have been, we always will be at Michigan."

The tackles had their moments the last two years, but the consistency wasn't quite where it needed to be. It's probably unfair to compare given the players they followed in All-American Mason Graham and fellow first-round draft pick Kenneth Grant, but with Michigan's "the expectation is for the position" mantra, there's no room for excuses.

The seniors, especially, have to set the example, and as one of four spring captains (as voted by his teammates), Pierce takes his duty seriously. When the new

strength staff ratcheted the workouts up a notch — sometimes a few more, according to the players interviewed this spring — he and others were the first to embrace it.

Elisaia and his staff tested them and introduced a "factor of toughness," Pierce said, one that should prepare them for fourth quarters of their toughest games on a brutal 2026 schedule.

"We've been through this at 6:30 a.m., 6:15 a.m., all these days," Pierce said. "In the grind together, it improves team bonding. It also puts you in a headspace that, 'We've done harder stuff than this. Nothing else can break us.'"

That's also the message he relayed to his teammates after being named a spring captain, an honor he doesn't take for granted. His first three years flew by, he noted, and being a senior is "bittersweet." He came in with the goal of progressing and making it to the NFL, but his focus now is on his teammates and making 2026 a championship season.

"I'm grateful," he said of his appointed leadership role. "I try and carry myself a certain way and do the right thing at all times. To see some of my teammates notice that, decide to vote me as a captain, was a truly humbling experience. I'm forever grateful to them, will hopefully do right by them.

"But I was voted a captain for a reason. I think if I continue to hold the standard I hold for myself, that holds my teammates to a high standard [too]. The expectation doesn't change because there are more eyes on me. If I had to change what I do after being voted captain, I shouldn't have been voted captain in the first place."

Spoken like a man who "gets it," and one of many who said the same coming out of spring ball. Most interviewed said this team felt "different" than the last few years, more focused from the top down and much more disciplined.

"I think it manifests on the field ... as a sophomore and junior under the last staff, just that experience and seeing what works and doesn't work," Pierce said. "We're seeing it here ...

"I'm super excited. I think the sky is the limit for this team. Just looking around during spring ball, we have guys at every position. I think, 'Man — this feels like a good team.' It feels pretty close to that 2023 team where you just have a guy at every position."

That's Pierce on the defensive line, and he understands the expectations that come with being one of them. You often hear coaches with the cliché, "I'd take 22 [so-and-sos] on this team if I could get them." This year, Pierce is that man, and they're all following his lead.

If his best is truly yet to come, that should bode well — *very* well — for Team 147. ❑

"I think it's just going to make us go harder. We're going to show that we are a strength of this team. We always have been, we always will be at Michigan."

PIERCE, REACTING TO SOME ONLINE CRITICISM OF THE MICHIGAN DEFENSIVE LINE

Pierce, Etta Hope To Be Michigan's Next Great DT Duo

Michigan has had some great defensive tackles in its storied history, and some of the best have come in recent years. Mazi Smith, Mason Graham and Kenneth Grant were all first-round NFL Draft picks in the last three years alone, while Kris Jenkins went in the second round in 2024. Combined with all the high-end defensive ends they've produced, that's made U-M one of college football's "Defensive Line U" standards in recent years.

Two Wolverines have a chance to add to that legacy this year, former Michigan defensive line coach Lou Esposito (who spent two-plus months with new coach Kyle Whittingham and his staff before moving on to the NFL) told us this spring.

"Last year, we just kind of put Trey Pierce's name on the map," he shared. "He should have a great year this year, both him and Enow Etta."

The duo arrived at Michigan in 2023 and earned national championship rings, Pierce playing in 13 games and Etta three. Having experienced their ups and downs in Ann Arbor, they understand what it takes to be on top.

That often starts with great interior line play, something the two talk about regularly.

"I think it's a great opportunity," Pierce said. "Me and Enow, we've played a lot of football together. Coming back, we're able to get starts and play a lot more games together. I think it's a huge opportunity. It's exciting."

The more they've played together, the more they've been able to anticipate each other's moves, Pierce said. Just like offensive linemen on their combo blocks, chemistry can go a long way on the defensive line.

"We've been together since our freshman year," Pierce said. "I can kind of give him a look, and then we know we're going to do this, whether it's a game or whether we're rushing. Me and Enow have this unspoken thing where we know what each of us is thinking at the same time at this point.

"That's huge. When you're rushing with someone you feel comfortable with next to you, you don't have to worry about them doing their job. You know they know what they're going to do. It's huge ... invaluable."

Both had limited success last year as pass rushers, but that's been an emphasis this spring under new defensive coordinator Jay Hill. Having played on the interior and the edge, Pierce understands it's a lot tougher to get to the quarterback from his projected tackle position. Things "happen faster," he said, adding, "guards are on you in one or two steps. Outside, it's like three or four.

"Everything kind of speeds up the further you are inside," he added. "The fundamentals are the same, though. Power, hands, eyes, feet ... it's pretty much the same across the board."

Those are all things he and Etta will be working on together this summer to make the Michigan interior pass rush one to fear again.

"That's my main focus through this whole offseason," Pierce said. "Especially this spring, going against our guards and our centers and our tackles, too, it was getting our pass rush up. I feel like I left a lot on the table this season in that regard.

"I think that's a gap in my game. If I get just a little bit better at that, it can change everything. It can change games, and it can change my trajectory as a player."

— Chris Balas

Daley posted 11.5 sacks and 17.5 tackles for loss in only 11 games before rupturing his Achilles tendon last season.
PHOTO BY ANNA FUDER/UTAH ATHLETICS

'Relentless'

John Henry Daley Is Healing, Working And Ready To Win

BY CHRIS BALAS

Contrary to what many believed when John Henry Daley committed to Michigan in January, his pledge wasn't an absolute certainty. Yes, the Utah transfer and senior thought highly of Kyle Whittingham, his coach for two seasons after an initial year at BYU and a man who helped elevate his game to an eye-opening level. Daley had gone from an inconsequential 4 tackles in his first season at Utah in 2024 to an All-American in 2025 with 11.5 sacks and 17.5 tackles for loss in only 11 games before rupturing his Achilles tendon, and the support he'd gotten from his coach kept his spirits high.

But the spiritual defensive end needed more than that to make another move. Before his early January visit, he made a list in his mind of things he needed to see or learn before he embarked on another chapter of his football journey.

"Obviously, Michigan was on the list, and I had a lot of other schools, as well," Daley said before spring ball. "I said, 'OK, I really want to receive an answer for this, so God, can you please answer my prayer?'

"I named a couple specific things I want to see happen if it was meant to be Michigan. Sure enough, the next morning we got a call, and everything that I prayed about the night before, all of it was answered that following morning. I just knew that it was the right spot to be."

Not so long ago, an Achilles injury like his would have been a near death sentence to a career. Advances in surgery and rehab have changed that dramatically, one of the reasons Whittingham and the Michigan NIL machine had no problem offering him a nice package to come to Ann Arbor.

With that, though, came the expectation that the talented 6-foot-4, 255-pounder would do everything in his power to get back in time for the season. Having seen his work ethic in person, Whittingham had no doubt ... and he's been proven right.

While his teammates worked on learning a new defense this spring, Daley was with trainers, sometimes inside, sometimes on the sidelines while the other Wolverines defenders were in pads. He had one goal in mind — to be as close to 100 percent as possible, as soon as possible.

"I'm just doing a whole lot of lower-body exercises, getting after it every day," he said in spring. "You'd have to ask the training staff about details ... but I do a lot every single day. I'm here every day and putting in that work because it's worth it."

It helped, he admitted, that he saw Boston Celtics standout Jayson Tatum return from the same injury in less than 10 months.

"It's great to see guys going out there and overcoming injuries," he continued. "Definitely, with this injury, looking at what other guys have been able to do coming back ... I take some inspiration from that, for sure.

"Physically, upper body-wise, I'm probably the best I've ever been in my life. Obviously, with regard to my injury, I'm coming along really well. I'm starting to jog and run right now, and I'm feeling fantastic. Everybody's very optimistic about it."

Driven In Every Way

As they should have been. On June 1, Daley got the "all clear" from doctors to resume all activities with the team with no limitations, just as Whittingham had projected from doctors' reports. Though he's technically one of the "new guys" in the room, he's also a natural leader, having bonded with the other veterans on the team.

During the dog days of rehab, they encouraged him and kept his spirits up, made him feel like he was still with them. He had great teammates at Utah last year, he noted, and he got the same feeling immediately when he arrived in Ann Arbor.

Having Whittingham waiting for him helped, too.

"You know what you get with Coach Whittingham," he said. "You know that you get discipline, you know that you get hard work, and we expect to win games. That's something that I love.

"He's got a very old-school mindset that we're going to come in, we're going to attack every single day, and we're going to be tough. It's not always going to be easy, but it's going to be worth it, and that's something that I love that you don't find everywhere."

And something he wanted to continue to be part of. It's another of the reasons he worked so hard to return. He doesn't plan to be watching from the sidelines, anxious to contribute to a contender.

There were tough days, he acknowledged, but it was worth it.

"Part of what goes into success, just in general, is having a goal and working tirelessly towards that, regardless of how [hard] it is," he said. "I think a lot of times people get stuck in the comfort zone of, 'Hey, I don't really want to do that today. Oh, this extra workout? This extra work? I don't want to do this or that.'

"That's something I told myself last year that I was just not going to do, regardless. I'm going to do what I don't want to do today. That way, tomorrow I'm able to accomplish what I want."

Now, he's here and ready to do exactly that. Interviewed by different outlets on Signing Day this year, Whittingham couldn't help but grin a bit in talking about his standout edge. While Daley isn't former U-M star Aidan Hutchinson, there are similarities in the way they play, evident in the coach's praise.

"He's a guy that has an incredible motor, plays every snap as if it was his last," Whittingham said. "He's a tremendously talented young man, was leading the nation in sacks last year before he went down with an injury ... we feel he probably would have led the nation last year had he stayed healthy.

"He's physical, but he's got great pass-rush ability. ... He's just a relentless throwback type of defensive end."

Coming from a coach who has built his success on several players in his image, that's about the highest compliment he can give. ❑

Daley Praises The Man Who Helped Develop Him

New Michigan coach Kyle Whittingham has been praised by his players and coaches, past and present, for his eye for talent and ability to develop, one aspect that made his Utah teams so tough to beat for so many years.

But ... he didn't do it alone. In fact, when edge John Henry Daley went from role player to All-American in a one-year span, he gave a lot of credit to his position coach, new Michigan defensive ends coach Lewis Powell.

"Man, Coach Powell ... I would say to any recruit who's watching this that Coach Powell's probably the best defensive end coach in the country," Daley said. "I feel like he's very patient with guys, and he understands that everybody has a different way of playing the game.

"Now, we all have our responsibilities that we need to do on the field, whether it's securing a specific gap in the run or pass rush, making sure that we're doing what we're supposed to. But he coaches every guy and lets them be their own player. He doesn't say, 'We have this one mold — and every single guy has to fit into it.'"

His new teammates have responded well to it, too. All the edges interviewed this spring, including veterans Dominic Nichols and Cam Brandt, were encouraged by their progress, individually and as a team. There are "a lot of dawgs" at his position who have high aspirations, Daley praised, and he said they have the will that they want to be great.

"Now, the coaches are just coming in and saying, 'Let's build on top of that,'" he said. "All in all, I couldn't ask for more. With this roster, with these players, with these coaches, I feel like we're building something great."

Especially on the edge, and thanks in large part to Powell.

"He takes you where you are and he just makes you better at what you're already good at doing, and he's been fantastic," Daley said. "I'm just so grateful that he's my coach, and very blessed."

— Chris Balas

BY CHRIS BALAS

SPRING SURPRISE

D-Line Impresses New Coaching Staff

It didn't take long for Kyle Whittingham to experience his first tiny taste of adversity after he arrived in Ann Arbor. Only weeks after he thought he'd finalized his first staff, the new Michigan head coach lost defensive line coach Lou Esposito, one of three holdovers from Sherrone Moore's staff, to the NFL's Baltimore Ravens.

At the time, it looked like a significant blow given Esposito's recruiting chops and the time of year, a day after Signing Day. But as organized coaches do, Whittingham got to work immediately on finding a replacement, landed a great one in Vanderbilt run game coordinator and defensive line coach Larry Black to complement ends coach Lewis Powell, and watched both impress this spring.

Of all the position groups on both sides of the ball, Whittingham tabbed the defensive line as one of the team's best after watching 15 practices. Some wondered if he might be embellishing the talent, but this group played well during the April 18 spring game.

"We have felt really good about the depth up front on defense," Whittingham said during the last week of spring ball in mid-April. "I feel like those guys have all really stepped up during spring football, so the defensive line should be a real strong suit for us.

"I feel like we have five defensive tackles and five defensive ends that we can win with, and that's all you can really hope for. If you have two-and-a-half guys, you have a good rotation."

Led by senior tackles Trey Pierce and Enow Etta, the line proved tough for the offensive line to block this spring. They were active, athletic, and disruptive, leading new defensive coordinator Jay Hill to agree with Whittingham that they were one of the best position groups on the team. Given that they were a question mark heading in, this was a very promising development.

"I thought there was maturity in that group, a bunch of guys that have at least played in games," Hill said. "There's talent in the group. It's not just experience. There's talent.

"The cool thing about that group, too, is I think they can just get better and better and better, because there's not a ton of reps there. There's good experience, but I wouldn't say an overabundance of experience in that group. I think they'll continue to get better."

Senior defensive tackle Enow Etta notched 15 tackles last year, including 2.5 for loss with a half-sack, and broke up a pass. He shared the team's Defensive Player of the Week honors for his performances at Michigan State and at Northwestern.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Defensive Tackles Leading The Way

Stopping the run is objective one for any defense, and the Wolverines have some big pieces to build around in the middle. It's safe to say Hill has as much raw talent to work with as he's had in his career, with all due respect to past teams at Utah and BYU, and he's proven he knows what to do with it.

Part of that is the result of learning from the best, he said this spring. Whittingham was his defensive coordinator when Hill played defensive back at Utah, and Hill also served as a graduate assistant to get his coaching start. He watched his coach develop a reputation as one of the best head coaches in the game, a "brilliant" X's and O's guy, and essentially answered Whittingham's phone call with "when do we start?" when the coach called to ask Hill to be his D.C.

Both understand that winning football starts in the trenches, and on defense, they have two potentially very good tackles in Pierce and Etta. Both were priorities to keep this fall, and getting them to re-sign NIL deals was like winning two huge recruiting battles.

Pierce should be the cornerstone on the

[FYI]

- U-M is losing 2,322 snaps from the 2025 campaign in defensive tackle Rayshaun Benny (458 snaps), edges Derrick Moore (450), Jaishawn Barham (375) and TJ Guy (362) and defensive tackles Damon Payne (348) and Tre Williams (329).
- Utah transfer **John Henry Daley** should be a huge boost to U-M's pass rush after an All-America season in 2025 at Utah, where he racked up 11.5 sacks and 2 forced fumbles in 11 games. He was Pro Football Focus' No. 6 edge rusher last season with a 92.0 overall grade, behind Texas Tech's David Bailey (93.3), Central Michigan's Michael Heldman (93.2), Miami's Ruben Bain Jr. (92.8), Texas Tech's Romello Height (92.5) and Miami's Akeem Mesidor (92.5). Bailey, Bain and Mesidor were first-round picks in the 2026 NFL Draft.
- Michigan signed a five-star EDGE in the 2026 class in **Carter Meadows** (Washington, D.C.), who was the class's highest-ranked addition at No. 11 in the nation. He is the first Rivals' five-star defensive line prospect to sign with the Wolverines since Christopher Hinton in 2019 (No. 15 overall, No. 2 defensive lineman).

line after a season in which he earned All-Big Ten honorable mention honors, starting all 13 games and notching 30 tackles with 1 for loss. He was named the team's co-Most Improved Player on Defense and shared Defensive Player of the Week honors for his performances at Nebraska, at Northwestern, and at Maryland.

Now 6-2, 310 pounds, the Chicago native will be asked to elevate his game even more this fall. Hill believes he will, noting that he was voted a spring captain for a reason.

"I love him as a player and as a person," Hill said. "He's so physical, and he's a great kid and is what I talk about when I say we've got great people at Michigan. He's a true student-athlete, he gets good grades … he does what he's supposed to do."

Etta, a senior with two years of eligibility remaining, has had a slow but steady ascent to the top of the depth chart over the last three seasons. He played in three games as a frosh, 10 as a sophomore, and all 13 last year when he notched 15 tackles, including 2.5 for loss with a half sack, and broke up a pass. He shared Defensive Player of the Week honors for his performances at MSU and at Northwestern, and this year he'll be asked to take one more huge step to become a regular on the line.

At 6-5, 320 pounds, the versatile Etta should be able to contribute just about anywhere on the line. He had a very good spring in showing off his ability to the new staff.

Senior defensive end Cam Brandt played in all 13 games with one start a year ago and notched 22 tackles, including 1.5 for loss with a half sack.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

"Oh, yeah," Hill said when asked if Etta had raised his game. "He's so athletic. Enow can run. For as big as he is, he's an athlete."

Right there with them is Utah grad transfer Jonah Lea'ea, a 6-5, 285-pounder who has worked on adding weight in the offseason to compete in the Big Ten, and spring game standout Deyvid Palepale. Lea'ea appeared in 13 games with 13 starts

DEFENSIVE LINEMEN

	TACKLE	
—	Titan Davis	(6-4, 275), Fr., DT
17	Enow Etta	(6-5, 320), Sr., DT
92	Ted Hammond	(6-5, 294), Jr., DT
99	Bobby Kanka	(6-4, 305), So., DT
91	Jonah Lea'ea	(6-5, 285), Sr., DT
57	Travis Moten	(6-6, 315), So., DT
54	Deyvid Palepale	(6-2, 335), Jr., DT
95	Trey Pierce	(6-2, 310), Sr., DT
—	Alister Vallejo	(6-3, 310), Fr., DT
	END	
51	McHale Blade	(6-4, 245), Fr., DE
—	Tariq Boney	(6-2, 245), Fr., DE
9	Cameron Brandt	(6-4, 270), Sr., DE
90	John Henry Daley	(6-4, 255), Sr., DE
88	Lugard Edokpayi	(6-7, 250), Jr., DE
—	Ndi Etta	(6-2, 215), Fr., DE
37	Julius Holly	(6-4, 230), So., DE
94	Nate Marshall	(6-3, 240), So., DE
—	Carter Meadows	(6-6, 235), Fr., DE
8	Dominic Nichols	(6-5, 255), Jr., DE
93	Benny Patterson III	(6-2, 270), So., DE

QUICK FACTS

Position Coaches: Lewis Powell and Larry Black (1st years at U-M)

Returning Starter: Trey Pierce (14 career starts)

Departing Starters: Derrick Moore (24), Jaishawn Barham (24), Rayshaun Benny (16)

Projected New Starters: John Henry Daley (11, at Utah), Cameron Brandt (1), Enow Etta (1)

Top Reserves: Dominic Nichols, Lugard Edokpayi, Nate Marshall, Jonah Lea'ea, Deyvid Palepale

Newcomers: Carter Meadows, Tariq Boney, McHale Blade, Ndi Etta, Titan Davis, Alister Vallejo

Moved In: Daley, Lea'ea

Moved Out: Devon Baxter (Virginia)

Rookie Impact: Meadows

Most Improved Player: Nichols

Best Pro Prospect: Daley

PRESEASON ANALYSIS

STARTER ★★★★

We were set to give this group 3.5 out of 5, even after Kyle Whittingham called the defensive line one of the team's top position groups this spring. After seeing them in action during the April 18 scrimmage, though — and given what we know about the talent that didn't participate this spring — we'll get a bit generous.

No, there are no obvious standouts in this group, but veteran tackles Enow Etta and Trey Pierce were priorities to keep on the roster this fall. They had good springs. Defensive end Cam Brandt started a lot of games, and end John Henry Daley, an All-American at Utah last year, should be very good if he returns from a lower leg injury. He's well on his way.

DEPTH ★★★½

There are talented players both inside and out, but not many are proven. Defensive end Dom Nichols has the potential to be an outstanding pass rusher if he can become a bit more consistent, and Utah transfer and senior Jonah Lea'ea is a jack-of-all-trades capable of playing several positions on the line. He was in the Utes' defensive line rotation last year.

Beyond that, some of the young guys are going to have to step up both on the edges and inside. Junior Deyvid Palepale showed he could be one of them in dropping bad weight and making plays this spring.

OVERALL ★★★½

We're still not overly bullish on this group, in part because we continue to hear they need a more consistent pass rush. Daley should help when he's back to full health, but ideally, you'd like pressure from both the interior and the edge, and we're not sure they'll have that.

But we love the line coaches, and the players have responded extremely well to them. The athleticism is there, and there are a few guys (Daley, Pierce especially) who have All-Big Ten or even All-America potential. That's a very good duo to build around.

for the Utes last year, notching 38 tackles, 2.5 tackles for loss, and a sack, while Palepale, now 6-2, 335 pounds, dropped significant weight and notched 3 tackles in the April 18 scrimmage, disrupting several other plays.

"Jonah Lea'ea is a dog, and Deyvid Palepale is just a beast. We've been seeing it in practice, and everybody else is going to notice this year," Pierce said. "Palepale is a freak athlete who puts his head down and just works at defensive tackle."

"Deyvid's in that rotation," Whittingham confirmed. "He's at least 330, 340 pounds, tough to move, and he's got some quickness."

With developing depth in sophomores Bobby Kanka (6-4, 305) and Travis Moten (6-6, 315) pushing them, this group seems more than capable of hanging with the big boys on the schedule.

Defensive Ends Showing Great Improvement

Despite having two edges go in the first three rounds of this year's draft, Michigan's pass rushers weren't exactly dominant in 2025. After Derrick Moore (10 sacks), no end had more than 4 sacks, and this year's defense will be asked to apply more pressure on the quarterback with guys who are less proven.

Enter Powell, who played for Whittingham and coached under him for 11 seasons at Utah, first as a line coach (2016-18), then defensive ends (2019-25) and helped put eight players in the NFL during his tenure.

An outstanding recruiter, Powell also made an immediate impact this spring with U-M's returnees.

"He's such a lovable guy and coach," senior defensive end Cam Brandt said. "He's been getting after us on and off the field, making sure we're doing the right things and attacking, and being competitive each day in practice. He's been a great person to learn from."

"Maybe it's because I'm a bit older and see things differently now, but I made a big jump with the help of his coaching," junior Dominic Nichols added. "He will always have your back, and it just makes you want to play harder for him. I'm a fan of Coach Powell."

And Powell of him. Ditto Whittingham, who believes Nichols has another gear he can reach, something the previous staff used to communicate, as well. The junior has the athleticism and get-off to be an outstanding pass rusher, and though he's only notched 1 career sack, the 6-5, 255-pounder will have every opportunity to get to the quarterback this year.

Nichols showed glimpses of his playmaking ability with 5.5 tackles for loss a year ago among his 19 total stops, appearing in 12 games on the edge. He was tough to block this spring, Whittingham reported.

"Dom Nichols is coming into his own. He's a force out there," the coach said. "He's 6-4 plus and 260 pounds, and he really has a great first step in pass rushing skills.

"He's a guy that I think has a chance to be All-Big Ten before he's finished here. I think he's that good, and it's up to him how good he can be. If he continues to work hard and put everything into it, then he's going to play this game for a long time."

As of now, though, he's not even assured to be a starter. Though the roster won't be set until August, most believe Brandt will get the nod on one side, while 2025 Utah All-American and transfer John Henry Daley will undoubtedly start on the other, assuming he's healthy. The 6-4, 255-pounder is working his way back from an Achilles injury suffered late last year.

Junior defensive end Dominic Nichols demonstrated his playmaking ability with 5.5 tackles for loss a year ago among his 19 total stops, appearing in 12 games on the edge.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Daley notched 48 tackles, 17.5 for loss, and 11.5 sacks in a breakout season. He was working out in a limited capacity this spring, running in early June and on track to return. Of those who participated, two stood out.

"Dom was great this spring," Hill said. "The ones who really stood out to me were Dom and Cam Brandt. Those guys both played really well. Add John Henry Daley to the mix, and you've got a first-team All-American from last year."'

Brandt played in all 13 games with one start at edge a year ago and notched 22 tackles, including 1.5 for loss with a half sack.

"Cam Brandt had a really nice spring. He was consistent for us all spring long," Whittingham said. "He dropped 5 or 10 pounds, and it really helped his game. It gave him more quickness and a little more burst off the edge."

As for Daley ... his former teammate, Utah transfer Smith Snowden, said Michigan fans are in for a treat.

"The dude has a freaking motor. He can *go*," Snowden said. "He's recovering really well. The process is going great for him. Once he gets healthy and all the pieces come together, this is going to be a really good squad."

Three others with great potential will

U-M Defensive Linemen Drafted In Last Three Years

Player	Position	Year	Rd.	Pick	Team
Mason Graham	DT	2025	1	5	Cleveland Browns
Kenneth Grant	DT	2025	1	13	Miami Dolphins
Derrick Moore	EDGE	2026	2	44	Detroit Lions
Kris Jenkins	DT	2024	2	49	Cincinnati Bengals
Josaiah Stewart	EDGE	2024	3	90	Los Angeles Rams
Jaishawn Barham	EDGE	2026	3	92	Dallas Cowboys
Rayshaun Benny	DT	2026	7	250	Baltimore Ravens
Jaylen Harrell	EDGE	2024	7	252	Tennessee Titans

also be in the mix, Hill added. It starts with sophomore Nate Marshall, a 6-3 240-pounder who has added weight and "shown progress" Whittingham said.

"[Junior] Lugard Edokpayi [6-7, 250] and [freshman] Benny Patterson [6-2, 270] stood out this spring as really great, up-and-coming guys," Hill said. "Throw in Carter Meadows [6-6, 235 freshman] and some of the new guys we just got, and that group is deep."

As is the entire D-line room, Whittingham praised.

"That appears to be our strongest suit right now as far as depth goes and 10 bodies ready to play," he said.

Which is always a positive when it comes to building a defense. ❑

Interior Pass Rush Is A Work In Progress

Michigan had a cheat code for a few years with All-America defensive tackle Mason Graham, one of the most dominant linemen in school history. His brute strength made him an almost impossible assignment for offensive linemen, and though he finished with only 9 career sacks, his interior rush and pocket destruction literally changed games.

Nobody expected the interior line to be as good last year, but there was hope it would be better than it was. Michigan defensive tackles only managed 2 sacks, and opposing quarterbacks were much too comfortable too often a year ago.

Defensive coordinator Jay Hill hopes to change that this year.

"It's always an emphasis. You want defensive tackles that can get after the quarterback," Hill said. "With that, every guy is different. Some guys have the ability to be block eaters, and some guys have the ability to be able to stab a gap and get in there quickly. Some guys are better at engaging with their hands and shedding."

They're still trying to figure out who can do what, but there was some interior pressure in the spring game. Junior Deyvid Palepale showed some with brute strength, while veterans Enow Etta, Trey Pierce, and Utah transfer Jonah Lea'ea all have the ability.

"I think it's still to be determined on exactly how we are as pass rushers at all the positions," Hill said. "But there is promise that we will be a dynamic group and get sacks from them."

— Chris Balas

POSITION COACHES

Defensive line coaching duties will be split among two assistants in 2026 with **Lewis Powell** holding the title of run game coordinator/defensive ends coach and **Larry Black** tabbed as defensive tackles coach. Both are in their first seasons at U-M.

Powell had previously spent 14 of the last 17 years with Kyle Whittingham at Utah, where he also played in his college career, graduating in 2004. He got his start in Salt Lake City as a graduate assistant (2009-10) before serving as an administrative assistant in 2011. Powell left for the defensive line coach position at Hawai'i from 2012-14 before returning to Utah in 2015 as a tight ends coach. He coached the defensive line from 2016-18 before moving to defensive ends in 2019, a role he held until leaving for U-M.

Black was hired as the defensive tackles coach in February 2026 after Lou Esposito departed for the Baltimore Ravens. He has 12 years of collegiate experience, including nine as a position coach. Before he arrived in Ann Arbor, he spent four seasons at Vanderbilt from 2022-25 coaching the defensive line, adding the title of run game coordinator in 2025. He got his start in coaching in 2015 at Division III Carthage College before serving as a graduate assistant at Toledo in 2016-17. He made the jump to Notre Dame in 2018 as grad assistant before heading back to Toledo to coach the defensive line from 2019-21. Black played collegiately at Indiana from 2008-12 and is the brother of former U-M defensive tackle Jibreel Black (2010-13).

RETURNING PLAYERS

CAMERON BRANDT • DE
Sr. • Carson, Calif.
Ht.: 6-4 • Wt.: 270

- Appeared in all 13 games with 1 start, making 22 tackles, 1.5 tackles for loss and 0.5 sacks in 2025.
- Saw time in 13 games off the bench in 2024, posting 10 tackles, including 3 for loss and 2 sacks, with 2 pass breakups and 1 forced fumble.
- Played in 14 games with 4 tackles in 2023.
- Produced 55 tackles with 4 sacks as a prep senior at Sierra Canyon High and made 52 stops, including 11 for loss with 5.5 sacks his junior campaign.
- Rated a three-star prospect, the No. 408 overall recruit and No. 46 defensive lineman in the country and the 34th-best player in California per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	Sacks
2023	14/0	4	0	0
2024	13/0	10	3	2
2025	13/1	22	1.5	0.5
Totals	**40/1**	**36**	**4.5**	**2.5**

LUGARD EDOKPAYI • DE
Jr. • Bowie, Md.
Ht.: 6-7 • Wt.: 250

- Appeared in eight games in 2025
- Didn't see game action in 2024 but was named Scout Team Defensive Player of the Week for preparing the offense for USC.
- Attended Bishop McNamara High School and racked up 22 tackles, 10 tackles for loss, 5 sacks and 5 passes defended as a senior.
- Four-star signee in 2024, ranked as the No. 116 overall player and No. 14 EDGE in the nation and as third-best player in Maryland, per Rivals Industry Ranking.

ENOW ETTA • DT
Sr. • Keller, Texas
Ht.: 6-5 • Wt.: 320

- Appeared in 13 games with 15 tackles, 2.5 tackles for loss, 0.5 sacks and a pass defended in 2025,
- Shared team Defensive Player of the Week honors after wins at Michigan State and Northwestern.
- Recorded 4 tackles with a half-sack and 1 pass breakup in 10 games as a backup in 2024.
- Saw 86 defensive snaps in 10 outings, the sixth-most among interior defensive linemen on the team.
- Appeared in three games as a freshman in 2023, making 1 tackle.
- Made 122 tackles, including 34 for loss with 20 sacks, 5 forced fumbles and 2 touchdowns as a prep senior at Covenant Christian Academy.

X-FACTOR

Junior defensive end **LUGARD EDOKPAYI** had become a bit of a forgotten man in the pass rush conversation, but he was a top-40 talent in the 2024 class despite being extremely raw. He has positioned himself for legitimate playing time after a strong spring and boasts a 7-foot-1 wingspan on a 6-7, 250-pound frame. There's a lot of upside to his game, and another offseason to hone his craft could allow a breakout campaign.

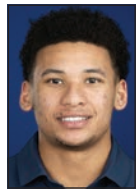
- Selected to the Polynesian Bowl.
- Slotted as a four-star, the No. 123 overall player and No. 15 defensive lineman nationally and 22nd-best prospect in Texas by the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	Sacks
2023	3/0	1	0	0
2024	10/1	4	0.5	0.5
2025	13/0	15	2.5	0.5
Totals	**26/1**	**20**	**3.0**	**1**

TED HAMMOND • DT
Jr. • Cincinnati
Ht.: 6-5 • Wt.: 294

- Appeared in one game in 2025.
- Didn't compete in any games as a freshman in 2024.
- Attended Cincinnati St. Xavier High School, recording 38 tackles, 2 tackles for loss and 0.5 sacks during his senior year.
- Also played basketball, baseball and competed as a swimmer.
- Three-star recruit, No. 441 overall player and 42nd-ranked defensive lineman nationally and 15th-ranked player in Ohio, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

JULIUS HOLLY • DE
So. • Alpharetta, Ga.
Ht.: 6-4 • Wt.: 230



- Played in one game in 2025.
- Played in only two games as a prep senior due to injury, after totaling 57 tackles with 8 for loss his junior year.
- Checked in as a three-star recruit, according to the Rivals Industry Ranking. Rated as the No. 42 edge in the 2025 class and No. 55 player in Georgia.

BOBBY KANKA • DT
So. • Howell, Mich.
Ht.: 6-4 • Wt.: 305

- Played in one game in 2025, recording a tackle for loss against Central Michigan.
- Became the first-ever freshman to start on varsity at Howell High School and spent all four years at that level, posting 38 tackles and 8 sacks as a senior.
- Selected to the U.S. Army All-American Bowl.
- The Rivals Industry Ranking listed him as a three-star and the No. 57 defensive lineman in the country, plus the 10th-best player in Michigan.

NATE MARSHALL • DE
So. • Oak Park, Ill.
Ht.: 6-3 • Wt.: 240

- Appeared in 11 games in 2025, recording 6 tackles with 1 kickoff return.
- Selected to the 2025 Navy All-American Bowl.
- Named 2024 Illinois High School Football Coaches Association Class 7A first-team all-state.
- The four-star recruit was listed as the No. 40 prospect and No. 4 edge in the nation, along with the third-best player in Illinois in the class of 2025, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

TRAVIS MOTEN • DT
So. • Louisville, Ky.
Ht.: 6-6 • Wt.: 315

- Appeared in one game on the defensive line in 2025.
- Tallied 95 tackles, including 30 for loss with 19.5 sacks, as a prep senior.
- A four-star prospect, Moten ranked as the No. 303 player and No. 29 defensive lineman in the nation in 2025, according to the Rivals Industry. Ranking.

DOMINIC NICHOLS • DE
Jr. • Frederick, Md.
Ht.: 6-5 • Wt.: 255

- Appeared in 12 games with 19 tackles, 5.5 tackles for loss and 1 sack in 2025.
- Michigan's Scout Team Player of the Year on defense, Nichols appeared in five games in 2024 — including four on the defensive line — and registered 3 tackles with 1 forced fumble.
- Retained his redshirt since he played in only four regular-season contests.
- Attended Oakdale High School, helping lead the program to the 2023 3A Maryland state championship and a 14-0 record in 2023.
- Oakdale's all-time leader in sacks (27), tackles for loss (51) and QB pressures (143), recording 206 career tackles.
- Three-star recruit, No. 424 overall player and No. 40 edge in the country and the 15th-ranked player in Maryland, per Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	Sacks
2024	5/0	3	0	0
2025	12/0	19	5.5	1
Total	**17/0**	**22**	**5.5**	**1**

DEYVID PALEPALE • DT
Jr. • Anchorage, Alaska
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 335

- Played in two games in 2025.
- Didn't see game action as a freshman in 2024.
- Played two seasons at Hempfield High in Pennsylvania and transferred to Manheim (Penn.) High as a senior.
- Played in two games in 2023 before suffering a season-ending injury.
- Recorded 49 tackles, 10 tackles for loss, 2.5 sacks and 1 interception as a junior, also recovered 2 fumbles and returned 1 for touchdown.
- Named a Polynesian Bowl All-Star.
- Rivals Industry Ranking of three stars and the No. 77 defensive lineman in the class.

BENNY PATTERSON III • DE
So. • Newburgh, Ind.
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 270

- Appeared in five games on special teams with two appearances off the edge.
- Named Scout Team Defensive Player of the Week in preparing the offense for the win at Nebraska in September.
- Credited with 70 tackles — including 14 for loss and 7 sacks — as a prep senior.
- Ranked as a four-star prospect, the No. 282 overall player and No. 32 edge rusher in the 2025 class, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

TREY PIERCE • DT
Sr. • Chicago
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 310

- Started all 13 games in 2025 with 30 tackles and 1 tackle for loss.
- Honorable mention All-Big Ten selection by the media.
- Named the team's co-Most Improved Player on Defense.
- Competed in 13 outings with one start (against Alabama) in 2024, notching 7 tackles.
- Appeared in 13 games, making 2 total tackles, in 2023.
- Notched 58 tackles with 19 stops for loss and 3.5 sacks as a prep senior at Brother Rice High.
- Named first-team all-state by The News-Gazette (Champaign-Urbana) and to the Chicago Sun-Times All-Area team as a senior in 2022.
- A three-star prospect, the No. 53 defensive lineman in the country and the seventh-best player in Illinois, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	Sacks
2023	13/0	2	0	0
2024	13/1	7	0	0
2025	13/13	30	1	0
Total	**39/14**	**39**	**1**	**0**

NEWCOMERS

McHALE BLADE • DE
Fr. • Country Club Hills, Ill.
Ht.: 6-4 • Wt.: 245

- Attended Simeon Career Academy in 2024-25.
- Spent first two years at Country Club Hills Hillcrest High in 2022-23.
- Credited with 12 tackles, 2 tackles for loss and 2 forced fumbles in 2025.
- PrepStar Top 300 All-American.
- Three-star prospect, No. 416 overall recruit,

No. 46 EDGE and No. 13 player in the state of Illinois, according to Rivals Industry Ranking.

TARIQ BONEY • DE
Fr. • Washington, D.C.
Ht.: 6-2 • 245

- Attended St. John's College and was a team captain in 2024-25.
- Played on the edge and at running back.
- Posted 48 tackles, 20 tackles for loss with 12 sacks, 2 forced fumbles and 6 passes defended with a blocked kick and a touchdown scored in 2025.
- Recorded 56 tackles with 7 sacks in 2024 and carried the ball 156 times for 1,897 yards with 29 touchdowns at running back
- 2026 Under Armour All-American Game invitee.
- Gatorade Player of the Year in Washington, D.C., in 2025.
- Named Washington Catholic Athletic Conference Defensive Player of the Year in 2025.
- Washington Post All-Met co-Defensive Player of the Year in 2025.
- No. 345 overall recruit and No. 37 EDGE in the country, a four-star prospect and the No. 2 player in D.C. according to the Rivals Industry Ranking.

JOHN HENRY DALEY • DE
Sr. • Alpine, Utah
Ht.: 6-4 • Wt.: 255

- Transferred from Utah in January 2026.
- Appeared in 21 games with 11 starts in his career.
- Credited with 58 tackles, 18.5 tackles for loss, 12.5 sacks, 2 forced fumbles and a pass defended in three seasons.
- Started all 11 games he played in 2025 with 48 tackles, 17.5 tackles for loss and 11.5 sacks with 3 forced fumbles and a pass breakup.
- Named a first-team All-American by the Walter Camp Football Foundation and was a second-team AP and AFCA selection.
- Chuck Bednarik Award semifinalist (2025).
- Injured Achilles in November, ending his season.
- Appeared in seven games in 2024 with 4 tackles and a sack.
- Spent freshman season at BYU in 2023, appearing in three games with 3 tackles.
- Father, Neal, played linebacker at BYU, along with uncles David Nixon, Craig Bills and Taysom Hill.
- Brother, Michael, played linebacker at BYU and Rice.
- Attended Lone Peak High in American Fork, Utah.
- John Henry and Michael run the Daley Foundation, a nonprofit providing extracurricular opportunities for children with special needs.
- No. 643 overall recruit, No. 32 athlete and No. 8 player in Utah, per Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	Sacks
2023*	3/0	3	0	0
2024^	7/0	4	1.0	1.0
2025^	11/11	48	17.5	11.5
Total	**21/11**	**55**	**18.5**	**12.5**

** at BYU, ^ at Utah*

TITAN DAVIS • DT
Fr. • Overland, Mo.
Ht.: 6-4 • Wt.: 275

- Helped De Smet Jesuit High to the Class 6 state championship in 2024 with a 13-2 record.
- Posted 30 total tackles, 15 solo tackles and 2.0 sacks in 2025.
- Recorded 48 tackles, 18 tackles for loss, 9 sacks and an interception in 2024.
- Had 34 tackles, 3 tackles for loss and 5 sacks as a sophomore in 2023.
- Also lettered in baseball.
- Began his prep career at quarterback.
- Invited to 2026 Navy All-American Bowl.
- Named a Missouri Class 6A first-team All-State honoree in 2024, along with Defensive Player of the Year honors.
- Four-star recruit, No. 86 overall prospect and No. 8 defensive lineman nationally and No. 2 player in Missouri, according to Rivals Industry Ranking.

NDI ETTA • DE
Fr. • Keller, Texas
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 215

- Attended Liberty Christian High, coached by former Dallas Cowboys TE Jason Witten.
- First team all-state honoree on the defensive line in 2025.
- All-district first-team selection as a senior and junior.
- Racked up 68 tackles, 17 tackles for loss and 10.5 sacks as a senior in 2025.
- Gathered 81 tackles, 18 tackles for loss and 9.5 sacks in 2024, along with an interception, forced fumble and a recovery.
- Began prep career at Covenant Christian.
- Brother of senior defensive lineman Enow Etta.

JONAH LEA'EA • DT
Sr. • San Mateo, Calif.
Ht.: 6-5 • Wt.: 285

- Transferred from Utah in January 2026.
- Spent three seasons with the Utes, appearing in 20 games with 12 starts, 42 tackles, 2.5 tackles for loss and a sack, along with a pass defended and a forced fumble.
- Started all 12 game appearances in 2025, posting 38 tackles, 2.5 tackles for loss and a sack.
- Appeared in six games and credited with 2 tackles during 2024 season.
- Made two game appearances in 2023, assisting on 2 tackles.
- Attended Bishop Gorman High in Las Vegas.
- Totaled 48 tackles, 19.0 tackles for loss with 8 sacks as a senior.
- High school teammate of U-M junior running back Micah Ka'apana.
- Three-star prospect, No. 1,047 overall player, No. 90 EDGE and No. 9 player in Nevada, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	Sacks
2023*	2/0	2	0	0
2024*	6/0	2	0	0
2025*	12/12	38	2.5	1
Total	**20/12**	**42**	**2.5**	**1**

** at Utah*

CARTER MEADOWS • DE
Fr. • Bethesda, Md.
Ht.: 6-6 • Wt.: 235

- Attended Gonzaga College High School.
- Recorded 62 tackles, 7 sacks, 2 forced fumbles and a fumble recovery as a senior.
- First-team Washington Catholic Athletic Conference All-Conference selection.
- 2025 Washington Post All-Met pick.
- Recorded 33 tackles, 5 tackles for loss with 2 sacks and a forced fumble in 2024.
- High school teammates with U-M sophomore defensive back Kainoa Winston.
- Five-star-plus prospect, No. 11 overall player and No. 3 EDGE in the country and the No. 1 player in D.C. according to the Rivals Industry Ranking.
- Michigan's top-ranked signee in 2026 class.

ALISTER VALLEJO • DT
Fr. • Liberty Hill, Texas
Ht.: 6-3 • Wt.: 310

- Three-year letterwinner at Liberty Hill High.
- Also lettered in track and field (throws).
- Played on the offensive and defensive lines.
- Recorded 62 tackles, 5 sacks and a fumble recovery for a touchdown in 2025, along with a blocked field goal.
- Accumulated 53 tackles, 12 tackles for loss and 8 sacks with 3 forced fumbles, a fumble recovered and 4 blocked kicks in 2024 as a junior.
- Named Class 5A Division 2 second-team All-State in 2024.
- Voted District 11-5A Division 2 Defensive Line MVP in 2024.
- Rated a four-star prospect, the No. 194 overall recruit and No. 21 defensive lineman in the country and the No. 28 player in Texas by the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Leading AND Competing

Troy Bowles Is Ready To Meet His Lofty Potential

BY CHRIS BALAS

Bowles appeared in all 13 Michigan games last season, including 12 at linebacker, and recorded 27 tackles, a blocked kick, a sack and a forced fumble.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

When he first committed to Georgia, Troy Bowles already had the weight of lofty expectations on his shoulders. The son of Tampa Bay Buccaneers head coach Todd Bowles, an eight-year NFL safety after an outstanding career at Temple, the younger Bowles never doubted his ability to follow his own path and make his own name for himself. That's how confident he was in his ability, a skill set that made him the No. 88 player overall in the 2023 recruiting class per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Bulldogs fans and writers predicted it, too, after watching him excel at Tampa Jesuit High. "The nation's No. 7 LB for 2023 has some clips on his sophomore and junior film that look ready for the next big-budget Hollywood film about high school football," one fan site writer praised, setting the bar for an already insatiable fan base extremely high.

However, after appearing in only seven games over two seasons for the Bulldogs, Bowles entered the transfer portal in 2025 and ended up at Michigan.

He got off to a great start in Ann Arbor, and it looked like the change of scenery was going to do him well. He notched an 11-yard sack in his U-M debut, the opener with New Mexico (Aug. 30), and recorded 2 tackles for loss among his 3 tackles in a very good showing.

Though his progress slowed a bit — he'd finish the season with 27 tackles, 2 for loss after seeing more time following Ernest Hausmann's sudden departure — he showed glimpses.

Now, though, there's no more waiting in the wings. He's a guy they need to step up and live up to his former four-star potential, and he's well aware.

"I view my role as a senior leader, bringing the young guys with me, and with the older 'backers making sure we're on the same page," Bowles said. "Whoever is out there, there's no drop-off from the starter.

"I feel more comfortable in the building, even though the people have changed a little bit inside. With my teammates, I feel more comfortable talking to everybody on the team. It doesn't matter what position. It's leading by example. It's meeting with the linebackers often even if it's not about football. Just hanging out with them and maybe showing the younger guys the ropes, how they should prepare."

That's something he learned from Jimmy Rolder a year ago, he noted, one of the veterans of the 2025 Michigan linebacker room now with the Detroit Lions as a fourth-round draft pick. Not only did he watch how Rolder carried himself on the field and in practice, but also how he warmed up and how seriously he took everything he did.

Like Bowles, Rolder had his moments early in his career, but it wasn't until his senior season that he really took off. Injuries played a part in that, but the point is the same.

It's never too late for a breakout season.

"I'm just carrying on what Jimmy did, passing it down to the younger guys," Bowles said. "My goal is to definitely start and lead the defense to the national championship.

"This spring was definitely easier than it has been in the past. Obviously, coming from a different school, being around numerous coaching staffs, applying everything I learned from my past to now has been easier, even with the new playbook."

In the past, he admitted, coaches would tell him to get in the playbook, but it was hit and miss. Now, "I actually get in the playbook," he said, and it helped him become one of the top three 'backers out of spring, according to head coach Kyle Whittingham. Bowles and sophomore Chase Taylor showed great promise, the first-year Michigan coach praised, while sophomore Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng will also be in the mix.

"As far as relative to game reps, it's a work in progress and that'll carry through the summer," Whittingham said.

A big part of that will be continued understanding of new defensive coordinator Jay Hill's defense … and yes, getting into the playbook, and maybe not just their own positions.

"It's not just learning the plays but also understanding why we're running it — why we're making a certain call against this formation," Bowles said. "When you understand the why, you understand the whole game, and it really slows down.

"It's really expanding on why we're doing something. If you tell somebody to blitz, obviously they know how to blitz, but it's the why. If you tell them to stay in their gaps, tell them why they have to, why it's important."

"I view my role as a senior leader, bringing the young guys with me, and with the older 'backers making sure we're on the same page."

BOWLES

Those are all areas in which he and not only his linebacker teammates, but also everyone on the defense made strides this spring. And while they're all competing for playing time, the linebackers have become an extremely tight-knit group.

"If you help everybody, they'll help you," he said. "There can't be any bad blood in the room. The cream is going to rise to the top. We're all just out there competing — congratulating each other when we make plays and helping each other on our mistakes."

READY TO LEAD

Truly understanding defense, though, is a lot easier for veterans who have played in the same defense year after year. That's not the case for any of them and especially Bowles, who is going on his third different system in three years, not ideal for any player.

But this one seems to fit the veteran who was once labeled a can't-miss prospect perfectly, and his excitement was evident this offseason. Though there was a lot of talk about the defensive line, especially from Whittingham, the linebackers will still be a major focal point of this defense.

Defensive coordinator Jay Hill has made it clear that he's not dumbing down the defense for anyone, noting he has high hopes for every position group. That's especially true of the linebackers, even with the inexperience.

"I feel like Coach Hill definitely wants the linebackers to be able to run the show, no matter which linebacker it is," Bowles said. "Young, old — we should all be able to run the show.

"It's definitely a run-and-hit defense with a lot of physicality. The room is new, but I like all the guys we brought in, personality-wise and playing-wise. And the new system with Coach Hill, I like it a lot. It puts us in the right position to make plays, everybody on the field. That's what I believe, and you can see it in our practices."

It took some getting used to, as most complex defenses do. Hill's scheme has been compared to former Michigan defensive coordinator Jesse Minter's — he's now the head coach of the Baltimore Ravens after having been successful at both the collegiate level and for Jim Harbaugh's Los Angeles Chargers — and that means a lot of disguise and understanding why even a yard or two out of position can make the difference between success and failure.

It's also dependent on good linebacker play and a defensive line that can keep them "clean" to make plays. Whittingham said this spring that group had been one of the most impressive on either side of the ball, while the secondary was in great shape with the first group. Depth there will be critical, as it will for the linebackers.

All of them were starting to work together as a cohesive unit by the middle of spring ball. It started when they all got a feel for what Hill was trying to do.

"I'll say maybe at the start when we first saw it was a little complicated, but I feel like the coaches we brought in, everybody, all of them are good teachers," Bowles said. "As teammates, we help each other with it. It's been cleaner from practice to practice with the installs and everything.

"They show you how to do it, tell you how to do it, and reinforce it a lot. I feel like reinforcement is a big part of learning — not just seeing it once but going over it and over it again."

Bowles seems to have a natural advantage, too, in that his father happens to be one of the 32 head coaches in the NFL and possesses an elite football mind. He started coaching as a collegiate assistant at Morehouse in 1997. Three years later, he was with the New York Jets as a defensive backs coach, and he continued to progress to the top of his profession.

Regardless, he never forced his son to play football, even though it was clear he had the ability. The younger Bowles also played basketball and ran track, but when it came time to focus on one, he followed his dad's path.

He also continues to follow his advice when it comes to what he's doing on the field. Like a fighter pilot, it's "don't think — just do," and on the football field that means be loose, react, and just play … "cutting loose," as his dad would say. On a daily basis, that also means improvement.

"Hone in on one thing you can get better at today," Bowles said of his strategy. "Pick one thing every day, make sure you're 1 percent better. It doesn't matter what it is."

At times in his career, that's meant rehab, including the months just before he got to Michigan. Offseason shoulder surgery prevented him from participating in spring ball, and it wasn't until late summer that he finally got to work with his teammates.

That was a challenge, he admitted, but it gave him time to learn the defense while watching. He and his teammates all had to memorize another playbook this spring, but they had help from a few guys who came from Utah with Whittingham.

In cornerback Smith Snowden, defensive lineman Jonah Lea'ea and defensive end John Henry Daley, the Wolverines

added three players familiar with the system. Though Hill coordinated the defense at BYU a year ago, he learned the defense and terminology up the road under Whittingham, making it an easier transition.

"They've definitely helped a lot," Bowles said. "I feel like every guy that's come from over there has been helping their specific position group, and even with stuff with the warm-up and how they do things, how they run things.

"It's still new terminology. I feel like it's going to be that way with any new playbook coming in, but it's still football at the end of the day."

And a fun defense to play in, he added. As long as the tackles do their job — and they were all about it this spring — the guys in the middle should be in great position to do theirs.

"I feel like this defense frees up the linebackers. We're getting a little bit more to the perimeter, so the safeties and the corners can make a lot more plays, too," Bowles said.

Overall, they're right where they need to be, Whittingham said after spring, on schedule with several months to go before the opener.

"We're not where we want to be, but we're in a very great spot," Bowles said. "You can see physicality going on. If we clean up the little things, we'll be good. As long as guys are flying around, being physical, you can't ask for much more right now."

Bowles did his part this spring, and he's ready to prove he's the player everyone expected him to be. The Michigan defense might depend on it, and he wouldn't have it any other way. ❑

Bowles (shown with linebackers coach Alex Whittingham) has developed into a more vocal leader on and off the field in his second year at Michigan. The 2023 Rivals Industry Ranking listed him as the No. 88 player and No. 7 linebacker in the nation, and the No. 21 prospect in Florida coming out of Tampa (Fla.) Jesuit.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Apple Didn't Fall Far From The Tree With Alex Whittingham

Sons of elite coaches have been hit or miss over the years. There's no guarantee they'll have the level of success of their fathers. Many do, of course — in the NFL, Kyle Shanahan (San Francisco, son of longtime coach Mike), former NFL coaches Wade and Bum Phillips, and closer to home, Jay Harbaugh (Seattle assistant, son of former U-M head coach Jim Harbaugh) come to mind — and Michigan fans are hoping the same will be true of new linebackers coach Alex Whittingham.

Early returns on first-year coach Kyle Whittingham's son have been extremely positive. After eight years with the Kansas City Chiefs, the 34-year-old will get his second shot at coaching a position group with the Michigan linebackers.

"I like him a lot," Michigan senior linebacker Troy Bowles said. "You could tell he came from the League. He's teaching us. ... We watch a lot of Chiefs tape because that's where he came from. We've been watching Chiefs linebackers Nick Bolton and Drue Tranquill, and that's been teaching us a lot."

Whittingham played for his father at Utah from 2013 to 2017, joining the team as a walk-on and excelling on special teams. He joined Chiefs head coach Andy Reid's staff in 2018 and has served a variety of roles under Steve Spagnuolo, one of the best defensive coordinators in the NFL, including two as a defensive assistant (2018, 2024). He also served five years as a defensive quality control coach (2019, 2020-23), was the assistant defensive line coach for the 2025 season, and spent his first year working with the outside linebackers before transitioning to the D-line room in 2019.

The Chiefs went to five Super Bowls in his eight years with the franchise, including the organization's titles in 2020, 2023, and 2024. While having an elite quarterback in Patrick Mahomes is obviously huge, the defense also played a big part. The Kansas City group was top 10 in scoring defense in six of Whittingham's eight years on staff, including a top-six mark in each of its final three seasons.

In addition to Bolton and Tranquill, Whittingham worked with standouts like Chris Jones, former Wolverine Frank Clark, Dee Ford, Willie Gay, Justin Houston, and others.

Playing for his dad and working in that NFL environment helped shape him, and it's shown at U-M. Both Whittingham and his dad are sticklers for detail, as the players found out quickly.

"It's definitely a little bit of an adjustment in a structure standpoint, but I feel like it's definitely really good for us," Bowles said. "We've been honing in on the details with Coach Whittingham. We do a lot more with the strength and conditioning staff. I think it's been great for us."

— Chris Balas

YOUNG BUT TALENTED

Overhauled Linebacking Corps Will Need To Grow Up Quickly

BY CHRIS BALAS

It's rare when a Michigan position group requiring three or more players on the field at the same time has to be fully restored in the offseason. Usually, a player or two with at least some meaningful experience is waiting in the wings to try to follow in the footsteps of some outstanding players who came before them.

New linebackers coach Alex Whittingham, though, won't have that luxury this fall when the Wolverines take the field for the first time. All three starters have departed, including Cole Sullivan (transfer to Oklahoma) and Jimmy Rolder (NFL, Detroit Lions). Of those returning, senior and Georgia transfer Troy Bowles — the returnee with the most experience — made his mark mostly on special teams.

But there will be no excuses from Whittingham, his dad (Michigan head coach Kyle Whittingham) or defensive coordinator Jay Hill, for this group or any other. There's enough talent in the room to jell into an extremely solid group, and a few in the linebacker corps who were recruited by most schools in the country.

Three of them — senior Troy Bowles and sophomores Chase Taylor and Nathan Owusu-Boateng — separated from the pack as the top three coming out of spring, and all had very impressive moments.

"I think the young linebackers are really taking steps forward," Kyle Whittingham said during spring ball. "We had very little experience returning at that spot and a bunch of new guys, and those guys have really stepped up and are really progressing."

Hill set the expectations the first time he met with the group this spring, Owusu-Boateng shared, showing them the group's stats from the 2023 national championship season compared to what they did last year. The emphasis was on playing without thinking too much and always being in the right place.

The defensive scheme they're playing this year is "fast and physical," the sophomore linebacker said, "guys just shooting their gun.

"A big thing we saw from last year was we didn't get to where we wanted to be," he said. "But with this new coaching staff and with new players who can help us get to where we want to be, I feel like everybody should really be excited. I know I am."

Sophomore Chase Taylor played 10 games at linebacker and also contributed on special teams, notching 10 tackles a year ago. He was perhaps the most improved player on defense during spring practice.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Projected Starters Made Huge Strides

Hill sang Alex Whittingham's praises for his work with the entire unit and was thrilled with the improvement. Though the corps is inexperienced, each of the linebackers interviewed this spring said the same thing as Owusu-Boateng — the expecta-

tions will be high, and there will be plenty of calls centered around their play.

With a stout defensive line keeping them clean of blockers, they were able to produce with their speed and athleticism.

"I've seen great progress in that group," Hill said. "Chase Taylor was maybe the most improved player on our football team this spring. He's got great athleticism, and he plays the game the right way. I'm excited to see how he continues to develop."

Some might call the 6-2, 237-pounder a pleasant surprise after he arrived as a three-star prospect, No. 799 overall in the 2025 class, but he was good enough as a freshman to see the field. He played 10 games at linebacker and also contributed on special teams, notching 10 tackles. He started to see more action later in the year, recording 3 tackles in extended play in a Nov. 1 win over Purdue, and continued to improve.

Bowles, too, started to show the consistency they were looking for. A former blue-chip prospect who appeared in all 13 games last season, including 12 at linebacker, he got more playing time later in the year and notched 27 tackles, including 2 for loss with 1 sack, a blocked kick on special teams and a forced fumble while showing his potential.

"I really like where Troy Bowles is," Hill said.

Bowles, the son of current Tampa Bay Buccaneers head coach Todd Bowles, looks comfortable and confident heading into his senior season, Hill said, ready to impact. He and Owusu-Boateng took on a leadership role in the room despite not having played a lot of snaps, understanding what's expected of them.

That will be a huge leap for Owusu-Boateng, who appeared in only seven games a year ago on special teams, five at linebacker, and notched only 4 tackles. But he was ranked as high as the No. 28 overall player nationally by Rivals coming out of Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy in 2025 for a reason. He's got the ability … now, he needs the experience.

"Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng, everyone knows about his potential and what he's becoming," Hill said. "He just needs reps, and we've got to get him on the field."

The sophomore believes he owes it to the program and his teammates to step up.

"It's because of what Michigan can provide for you," he said, adding he had lofty goals. "Being a leader this year with the

THEY SAID IT

"I like [new position coach Alex Whittingham] a lot. You could definitely tell he's come from the league with what he's teaching. We watch a lot of Chiefs tape because that's where he came from. We watch a lot of tape on Nick Bolton and Drue Tranquill. He's been teaching us a lot." — *Senior linebacker Troy Bowles*

LINEBACKERS

30	Max Alford (6-1, 230), Gr.
18	Troy Bowles (6-0, 230), Sr.
33	Kaden Catchings (6-1, 220), Fr.
23	Markel Dabney (6-1, 225), Fr.
43	Zach Ludwig (6-2, 225), Jr.
13	Aisea Moa (6-2, 238), Gr.
12	Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng (6-1, 217), So.
52	Christian Pierce (6-0, 235), So.
15	Aden Reeder (6-2, 215), Fr.
44	Nathaniel Staehling (6-2, 238), Gr.
29	Chase Taylor (6-2, 237), So.

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defense. First-team All-Big Ten ... that's a big goal for me. And then being an All-American this year."

Projected Backups Will Push For Time

Given the lack of experience at the position, Michigan coaches went to the portal for help, looking for a potential starter or two to compete. Pitt's Rasheem Biles and Cal's Cade Uluave were high on their wish list, but Texas landed Biles with a reportedly substantial NIL deal, and BYU won the Uluave sweepstakes.

In their place, U-M turned to a 2025 FCS standout, a former rival and a familiar name to provide depth and compete for time. All will get opportunities this fall after joining the team in the spring.

"A few guys I'm super excited about that have played a lot of college football are Nathaniel Staehling, Aisea Moa, and Max Alford, who was with me at BYU," Hill said. "Those last three guys, for whatever reason — injury, transfer — they didn't do a lot in the spring. But those guys add great depth to the room."

Staehling (6-2, 238) spent four seasons at North Dakota State and was a team captain as a senior in 2025. He appeared in 32 games during his career, notching 91 tackles (7 for loss) with 1.5 sacks, 8 pass breakups, 3 interceptions, and 2 fumble recoveries. Most of his production came last year, when he registered 75 tackles, including 6 for loss with 1.5 sacks, 1 fumble recovery, 4 pass breakups and 3 picks.

An honorable mention All-Missouri Valley Conference linebacker in 2025, he's one many are excited to see more of in fall camp after he spent much of spring recovering from an injury.

Moa (6-2, 238), older brother of freshman receiver Salesi Moa, spent three seasons at BYU (2022-24) and one at Michigan State (2025) before transferring to U-M in the offseason. He's been a backup, for the most part, though he appeared in all 12 games for the Spartans last year and 12 more for BYU the previous year.

He contributed 12 tackles, including 1 for loss, with 2 pass breakups for MSU and 16 for the Cougars, including one start, 0.5 tackles for loss, and a forced fumble.

"It was something I couldn't pass up," Moa said of playing with his brother. "I had to take advantage of it. We talked about it — it was going to be a great experience to come here together, play in the Big House, play for the best team in college football."

It helped him, too, that he played for Hill at BYU before moving on to MSU.

Michigan's Leading Tacklers The Last 10 Years

Season	Player	Total Tackles
2016	Ben Gedeon	94
2017	Devin Bush	94
2018	Tyree Kinnel	72
2019	Khaleke Hudson	102
2020*	Josh Ross	53
2021	Josh Ross	106
2022	Junior Colson	101
2023	Junior Colson	95
2024	Ernest Hausmann	89
2025	Jimmy Rolder	73

** Six-game season*

[FYI]

- No position group on the roster was as rocked by the offseason as the linebackers, who lost three players with starting experience from last year. Seven of the 11 scholarship players were not with the program last season, which includes four transfer portal additions and three true freshmen, all of whom were winter enrollees. North Dakota State transfer **Nathaniel Staehling** has the most proven production, racking up 75 tackles over 13 starts last season at the FCS level.
- New position coach **Alex Whittingham**, the son of head coach Kyle Whittingham, will be coaching at the collegiate level for the first time after eight seasons with the Kansas City Chiefs in the NFL. As a defensive assistant, he was part of five Super Bowl appearances and three championships while working with each position group during his tenure under head coach Andy Reid and defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo. While working with the linebackers from 2020-23, he helped guide Nick Bolton to a record-breaking season, setting a franchise mark with 180 total tackles in 2022. Players he coached combined for four Pro Bowl seasons in Kansas City.
- Six of U-M's 11 scholarship linebackers have either freshman or sophomore eligibility. Second-year players **Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng** and **Chase Taylor** are expected to compete for starting roles, with classmate **Christian Pierce** providing depth, along with freshmen **Aden Reeder**, **Markel Dabney** and **Kaden Catchings**.

PRESEASON ANALYSIS

STARTER ★★★

Despite the optimism from the coaches, this is a "wait and see" until we see them against good competition. That will likely come in Week 2 against Oklahoma, a team that exposed a veteran U-M linebacker group at times last year in Norman.

We like the athleticism here with Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng, Troy Bowles and Chase Taylor, but only Bowles has played significant minutes. There are others who will push these three, but we'd bet on this trio and hope linebackers coach Alex Whittingham gets the most out of them.

DEPTH ★★★

There was hope they'd add one more proven piece from the transfer portal to this group, but it didn't work out. Given that, depth is undoubtedly the biggest concern at linebacker — they'll be relying on players with little experience in the starting lineup, too. North Dakota State transfer Nate Staehling played a lot of football in his three-year career with the Bison, but not at this level. He was banged up a bit in spring and will have to catch up this summer and fall, but there's hope he can rise to the occasion if called upon.

Michigan State transfer Aisea Moa, BYU transfer Max Alford and several freshmen will be in the mix, as well. Some will need to step up.

OVERALL ★★★

This unit could certainly exceed expectations given the athletes they have and given what we know about linebackers coach Alex Whittingham. He was an assistant on the staff of five Kansas City Chiefs teams that reached the Super Bowl, and he has three rings. He worked with every defensive position group during his time with the franchise, including outside linebackers. His father, head coach Kyle Whittingham, obviously knows a few things about defense, too.

We'd feel better if U-M had at least one returning starter and another proven commodity here, but "it is what it is," as former U-M coach Lloyd Carr used to say. They'll need a few guys to grow up quickly.

X-FACTOR

The top two linebackers coming out of spring camp appear to be sophomore Chase Taylor and senior Troy Bowles, but a versatile weapon could be waiting in the wings in sophomore **NATHANIEL OWUSU-BOATENG**. The former four-star recruit should have opportunities to affect the lineup as a versatile weapon capable of blitzing, dropping into coverage and coming downhill and making plays. He is a hybrid talent who should be a nice chess piece in Jay Hill's defense.

Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng, another sophomore, is on the rise after only appearing in seven games last fall, with 4 tackles. He was ranked as the No. 28 prospect nationally by Rivals in 2025 and brings tremendous upside potential.

PHOTO BY TY KORNBLUE

"I knew the defense pretty well. I played linebacker in it before," he noted. "It was nice to come in already knowing the defense. It's a very complex defense and takes a long time to learn it. But the linebackers get a lot of freedom to switch up the fronts, do stuff with the D-line, put us in position to make plays."

Finally, Alford, a nephew of Michigan running backs coach Tony Alford, spent three seasons at Utah State (2022-24) and one at BYU (2025) before transferring to Michigan. He appeared in 28 games (10 at BYU) with five starts at linebacker, notching 62 tackles, including 5.5 for loss with 1 sack.

Alford didn't start a game for the Cougars but did play enough to notch 21 tackles, including 2 for loss with 1 sack, last season. Injuries have set him back — he redshirted after one snap due to injury in 2023 and played only four games due to injury in 2024 — but he has some ability. Not a high-end athletic player, and a guy who some say still looks like the converted running back he is, he has high IQ and will get the most out of his ability.

"I like this group of linebackers," Hill said. "We've just got to let them play. They just need to play football."

They'll get their chance this fall, and an opportunity to prove they aren't the weak link on the defense many might surmise due to their lack of experience. ❑

QUICK FACTS

Position Coach: Alex Whittingham (1st year at U-M)

Returning Starters: None

Departing Starters: Ernest Hausmann (23 career starts at U-M, 7 at Nebraska), Jimmy Rolder (10), Cole Sullivan (3)

Projected New Starters: Troy Bowles, Chase Taylor, Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng

Top Reserves: Nathaniel Staehling (13 at North Dakota State), Aisea Moa (1 at BYU), Max Alford (5 at Utah State)

Newcomers: Kaden Catchings, Markel Dabney, Aden Reeder

Moved In: Staehling, Moa, Alford, Christian Pierce

Moved Out: Sullivan (Oklahoma), Jaydon Hood (Georgia State)

Rookie Impact: None

Most Improved Player: Taylor

Best Pro Prospect: Bowles

POSITION COACH

Alex Whittingham leads the linebackers into the 2026 season in his first season at U-M. Whittingham spent the last eight seasons working in the NFL with the Kansas City Chiefs organization, where he held several roles as part of the defensive coaching staff.

Whittingham, the son of U-M head coach Kyle Whittingham, was part of Chiefs teams that went to five Super Bowls and won three titles (2020, '22 and '23). During his time with the franchise, he gained experience with every position group. Over his first two years in Kansas City, he worked as an assistant with the outside linebackers and defensive line before moving into a quality control role with the linebackers from 2020-23. Whittingham moved to a secondary defensive assistant role in 2024 before taking on assistant defensive line coach duties in 2025.

Whittingham, a key lieutenant for defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo, helped the Chiefs achieve a top-10 scoring defense in six of his eight years on staff, including a top-6 mark in his final three seasons with the organization. In each of his last four seasons, the Chiefs were top-12 in yards allowed per game.

Whittingham played for his father at Utah from 2013-17 and appeared in 45 contests.

RETURNING PLAYERS

TROY BOWLES • LB
Sr. • Tampa, Fla.
Ht.: 6-0 • Wt.: 230

- Appeared in all 13 games in 2025, recording 27 tackles, 2 tackles for loss and a sack, along with a blocked kick and forced fumble
- Transferred in from Georgia in 2025 after two years with the Bulldogs.
- Redshirted as a sophomore in 2024, appearing in two games at linebacker.
- Played in five outings as a freshman in 2023, registering 5 tackles.
- Father is Todd Bowles, the head coach of the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers.
- Regarded as a four-star recruit, according to the Rivals Industry Ranking for the 2023 class. He checked in as the No. 88 overall prospect and seventh-best linebacker in America, and the No. 21 player in Florida.

NATHANIEL OWUSU-BOATENG • LB
So. • Hyattsville, Md.
Ht.: 6-1 • Wt.: 217

- Played in seven games, mostly on special teams, and totaled 4 tackles in 2025.
- Enrolled early in January 2025.
- Attended Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy his final two years of high school, after transferring from Hyattsville (Md.) DeMatha Catholic.
- Missed his senior season with injury following a 45-tackle junior campaign in 2023.
- The Rivals Industry Ranking placed him as a four-star recruit, the No. 235 overall player and No. 25 linebacker in the 2025 class, plus the 33rd-best prospect in Florida.

CHASE TAYLOR • LB
So. • Stockbridge, Ga.
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 237

- Appeared in 10 games during 2025 season, making 10 tackles and recovering a kickoff.
- Joined the program as an early enrollee in January 2025.
- Contributed 62 tackles with 10 for loss as a prep senior at Stockbridge (Ga.) High.
- The three-star recruit was slotted as the No. 72 linebacker in the country and the No. 87 player in Georgia.

ZACH LUDWIG • LB
Jr. • South Park, Pa.
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 225

- Appeared in first career game against Central Michigan in 2025.
- Did not see game action as a freshman in 2024.
- Attended South Park High School, recording 53 tackles with 3 tackles for loss and a sack in 2023.
- A two-way contributor who also played quarterback.
- 2023 PrepStar All-Eastern Region selection.
- Nephew of former U-M strength coach Ben Herbert.
- Three-star prospect, No. 166 linebacker in the nation and No. 46 player in Pennsylvania, according to the Rivals Industry Ranking.

NEWCOMERS

MAX ALFORD • LB
Gr. • Park City, Utah
Ht: 6-1 • Wt.: 230

- Transferred from BYU.
- Appeared in 10 games in 2025, totaling 21 tackles, 2 tackles for loss and a sack.
- Spent first three seasons at Utah State.
- Played in four games in 2024 and credited with 2 tackles.
- Started in his only game appearance in 2023.
- Appeared in all 13 games with four starts during freshman season in 2022, recording 40 tackles and 4 tackles for loss.
- Attended Park City High, also lettering in track and field, basketball and lacrosse.
- High Honor Roll student, four-year Academic All-Region selection.
- Late father, Aaron, played at Colorado State and coached under Kyle Whittingham at Utah.
- Nephew of U-M running backs coach Tony Alford.
- No. 1,768 recruit, No. 121 running back and No. 37 player in Utah in 2022 class, per Rivals Industry Rating.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	Sacks
2022*	13/4	40	4.0	0
2023*	1/1	0	0	0
2024*	4/0	2	0	0
2025^	10/0	21	2.0	0
Totals	**28/5**	**63**	**6.0**	**0**

** at Utah State*
^ at BYU

KADEN CATCHINGS • LB
Fr. • Jackson, Miss.
Ht.: 6-1 • Wt.: 220

- Enrolled early in January 2026.
- Attended Hartfield Academy in his hometown.
- Helped program to three consecutive state championship games from 2023-25, winning back-to-back titles in 2023 and 2024.
- Played running back and linebacker in high school.
- Totaled 336 yards rushing and 6 touchdowns in eight games in 2025, along with 29 tackles and 2 sacks on defense.
- Rushed 127 times for 1,065 yards with 16 touchdowns and gathered 47 tackles with 6 passes defended as a junior in 2024.
- Three-star prospect, No. 1,045 overall player and No. 99 linebacker nationally and No. 32 player in Mississippi, per Rivals Industry Ranking.

MARKEL DABNEY • LB
Fr. • Chesterfield, Va.
Ht.: 6-1 • Wt.: 225

- Winter 2026 enrollee.
- Attended Huguenot High.
- Totaled 151 tackles, 25 tackles for loss, 14 turnovers forced, along with more than 2,300 all-purpose yards with 33 touchdowns in his prep career.
- Made 68 tackles, 9 tackles for loss and an interception in 2025, also carried the ball 40 times for 448 yards and 8 touchdowns with 12 catches for 176 yards and 4 scores.
- Helped lead team to 11-1 record in back-to-back seasons, reaching state semifinal in 2025.
- Credited with 74 tackles, 4 sacks, 4 forced fumbles and 2 interceptions for touchdowns in 2024.

- Named first-team All-Metro by Richmond Times-Dispatch and first-team All-Region in 2024.
- Listed as a three-star prospect, the No. 790 overall player and No. 68 linebacker in the country and the No. 21 player in Virginia by the Rivals Industry Ranking.

AISEA MOA • LB
Gr. • North Ogden, Utah
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 238

- Transferred from Michigan State.
- Appeared in all 12 games in 2025 with 12 tackles, 1 tackle for loss and 2 passes defended for the Spartans.
- Spent first three collegiate seasons at BYU.
- Played in all 12 games in 2024 with one start, totaling 16 tackles, 0.5 tackles for loss and a forced fumble.
- Appeared in five games over first two seasons, recording his first career tackle in 2023.
- Attended Weber High, contributing as a defensive lineman and tight end.
- Brother of U-M freshman wide receiver Salesi Moa.
- Four-star recruit, the No. 377 overall player and No. 36 EDGE nationally and No. 7 player in Utah, per Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	Sacks
2022*	2/0	0	0	0
2023*	3/0	1	0	0
2024*	12/1	16	0.5	0
2025^	12/0	12	1.0	0
Totals	**29/1**	**29**	**1.5**	**0**

** at BYU*
^ at Michigan State

CHRISTIAN PIERCE • LB
So. • Chicago
Ht.: 6-0 • Wt.: 235

- Transferred from Western Illinois.
- Appeared in one game during 2025 season.
- Attended Brother Rice High (Ill.).
- Helped Crusaders to 6-4 record and Division 7A playoffs as a senior.
- Brother of senior defensive lineman Trey Pierce.
- No. 1,038 overall prospect and No. 112 linebacker in the 2025 class and No. 26 player in Illinois, according to Rivals Industry Ranking.

ADEN REEDER • LB
Fr. • Monroe, Ohio
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 215

- January 2026 enrollee.
- Attended St. Xavier High.
- Recorded 77 tackles and 10.5 sacks in 2025.
- Posted 74 tackles, 14.5 tackles for loss, 3 sacks, 3 passes defended and 3 forced fumbles during 2024 season.
- Also lettered in track and field.
- No. 662 overall player and No. 58 linebacker in the country, and No. 32 player in Ohio, according to Rivals Industry Ranking.

NATHANIEL STAEHLING • LB
Gr. • Baxter, Minn.
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 238

- Transferred from North Dakota State in January 2026.
- Spent four seasons at NDSU, appearing in 32 games during his career with 91 tackles, 7 tackles for loss, 1.5 sacks, 8 passes defended, 3 interceptions and 2 fumble recoveries.
- Team captain in 2025.
- Totaled 75 tackles, 6 tackles for loss, 1.5 sacks, a fumble recovered, 4 pass breakups and 3 interceptions in 13 games as a starter in 2025.
- Appeared in five games in 2024, making 4 tackles.
- Checked into 14 games in 2023 with 12 tackles en route to first varsity letter.
- Did not see game action in 2022.
- Attended Brainerd High, also lettering in basketball, baseball, and track and field.
- Played quarterback, running back, safety, punter and kicker during prep career.
- Father, Joel, played at Augsburg College.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	Sacks
2022	0/0	0	0	0
2023	14/0	12	0	0
2024	5/0	4	0	0
2025	13/13	75	6.0	1.5
Totals	**32/13**	**91**	**6.0**	**1.5**

Senior Troy Bowles (18) has the most returning experience in the unit, with 13 games played a year ago at linebacker and on special teams.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

A STEP UP

Smith Snowden Is Ready To Show What He Can Do On The Biggest Stage

BY CHRIS BALAS

Snowden started 24 of 36 games played during three seasons at Utah, racking up 92 tackles and adding 4 interceptions (including 1 pick six) and 25 pass break-ups.
PHOTO COURTESY MICHIGAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Smith Snowden had a plan when he committed to Utah and head coach Kyle Whittingham as a four-star cornerback out of Lehi (Utah) Skyridge High. Like many his age, the 2023 standout wanted to bring glory to the home state school before embarking on a successful NFL career, preferably after a great junior season.

For several few weeks following the Utes' 10-2 regular season a year ago, the 5-10, 185-pounder considered pursuing the dream. He'd earned second-team All-Big 12 honors after playing both ways, broke up a team-high 11 passes on defense, and earned notice from NFL teams as a potential draft pick.

When it came time to decide on his future, though, something prevented him from jumping two feet in.

"I'm a local kid from Utah, went to Utah for three years. My goal, my plan, was always to be a three-and-out type of guy — to play three years and go to the next level," Snowden admitted. "I was kind of thinking both ways, but my [draft] grade wasn't where I wanted it to be. I knew I left a lot of unfinished plays on the field that I wanted to make, and I wanted to create more plays and continue to grow in my craft."

Like most, he just assumed it would be in Salt Lake City. But when Whittingham stunned the college football world and left for Michigan, Snowden couldn't help but think it might be his destiny, too. He loved Utah, of course, but he he was thinking bigger.

"And this opportunity came up," Snowden recalled. "I hit the transfer portal. I still took and enjoyed my visits, but I think this was the right fit. It just made sense.

"I'm a lockdown corner who loves to compete. I have a really competitive nature. I want to go out there and compete at the highest level, and I'm so excited and blessed to be at the University of Michigan. It doesn't get bigger than this."

If that's truly the case — the lockdown part, that is — then this Michigan secondary could exceed already high expectations. With senior Jyaire Hill on the other side, the potential is there for one of the better tandems in the Big Ten, and possibly the country.

However, there's still plenty Snowden has to prove, and it starts with earning his way on to the field. He had a minor surgery after last season that required an eight-week recovery. He didn't even get to the practice field until the last 10 days of spring practice. Even then, he was somewhat limited.

Having played the gamut at Utah — outside corner, slot, nickel, in addition to dabbling on offense last season — he's proven his versatility. But, so have the guys he's competing with.

"I was telling my buddies, 'Dang — it's hard to transfer to a new spot and deal with the injury that I had last season,'" he said. "I was just grateful that it was only an eight-week recovery. I was ready to get out there.

"... I think it just comes down to being humble and hungry. I haven't earned anything yet. You've just got to come every single day, earn your stripes, be a team guy, and I think everything will come from just doing that."

Working Hard, Fitting In

According to teammates and coaches, that process has already begun. Defensive coordinator Jay Hill said he could tell when Snowden initially stepped on the field for some of the basics, he knew he had a guy who would help the room. Even before that the coach had said, "I believe he is one of the better corners in the country," adding he planned to play him both at corner and nickel to compete with Michigan veteran Zeke Berry and others.

"I want to go out there and compete at the highest level, and I'm so excited and blessed to be at the University of Michigan. It doesn't get bigger than this."

SNOWDEN

The competition is a step up from what Snowden is used to, but he's not shying away from the challenge. He spent a good portion of spring ball watching the teammates he'll be battling with — both for time and against other opponents this fall — and he's excited to get it going.

"Shug [Jyaire Hill] and Zeke, those two are straight ballers," Snowden said. "I can't wait to pick their brains and just continue to work my craft. They are going to get better, too ... and we're going to get each other better.

"Shug and Zeke, they're gifted. They're two-year, three-year starters. They've been in the system. They know how it's run, and I'm just excited to be around guys like that."

But there are things he can teach them, too, including a few about the new coaching staff. Having played for Whittingham for three years, he knows what makes the coach tick and what he's looking for.

It's relatively simple, he explained.

"Just work hard," Snowden said. "Coach Whitt's a simple man. If you work hard, do what you've got to do, take care of business, you're going to be on the right track.

"It's been a smooth process. Coach Whitt has been doing it for so long, he has a good hang of it. Everyone on the team is getting a really good taste of the culture and just the schedule and what it's supposed to look like. The transition has been really smooth."

Likewise with Coach Hill, who played and coached under Whittingham. While the holdover players are adjusting to another defense, Snowden is more familiar with it, Hill having kept a lot of the same philosophies at BYU before leaving for Michigan. The core is "really similar," Snowden noted, and he's been in the playbook.

So have his fellow corners. Hill inherited a great group to work with, he added, praising his new teammates. They're all in the same situation preparing for the season, and he's more than impressed with his new teammates.

"The coaching staff and the previous coaching staff did a really good job of just recruiting the right guys who are team guys and locker room guys," he said.

Adding just the right pieces — Snowden included — will help what could be a fantastic defense on the field this fall. ❑

Snowden, who earned second-team All-Big 12 honors at Utah last season, is looking forward to playing in front of 107,601-plus fans at The Big House this fall.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Versatility Might Create More Options For Snowden

Michigan has had its share of two- or even three-way players over the years, offensive and defensive players crossing over to special teams or even the other side of the ball. There was only one Charles Woodson, of course, in the modern era, someone who excelled at all three, but he proved there's that role for someone with his ability.

Utah transfer Smith Snowden might not be in that category, but the outstanding cornerback was good enough the last few years that he dabbled on offense and contributed in the return game. He's hopeful to get the opportunity this year at Michigan.

"We have some really good returners, but I would love to return," Snowden said. "I think we're just going to see how everything plays out, but we've got [sophomore receiver] Andrew Marsh, who can go. He's a straight beast, and he's returning right now, I believe."

But Snowden was good, too. He served as kick returner in the last four games of the 2024 season and averaged 26.7 yards on 7 returns. He only ran back 3 a year ago, but special teams coach Kerry Coombs is well aware of his ability.

"Coach Coombs is awesome. He's a great coach who knows a lot," Snowden praised. "He has a lot of knowledge to give. He's coached a lot of players, and a lot of players I've actually looked up to growing up. As a defensive back, you watch DBs growing up.

"I've known Coach Coombs for a while now. He actually recruited me when I was back in high school."

And now, everything's come full circle, he noted. If he gets the chance to contribute in the return game, great. If not, he'll give his all to the defense.

"I'm just grateful," Snowden said, "to be here at Michigan."

— Chris Balas

Grad student cornerback Zeke Berry earned second-team All-Big Ten honors last season.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

LAST LINE OF DEFENSE

Secondary Should Be A Strength For Michigan 'D'

BY CHRIS BALAS

Two bits of news came out of Michigan spring ball that provided hope that the U-M secondary, under first-year coaches Jernaro Gilford (corners) and Tyler Stockton (safeties), might have the chance to be good — maybe even great — this fall. The first came when senior corner Jyaire Hill was named as one of 11 players to comprise the "leadership council," appointed as one of the leaders of a talented defense. That would have seemed a long-shot just a couple years ago, when coaches spoke of "Shug" as a talented player who still needed to mature to reach his potential.

The second wasn't quite as subtle, and it could raise the defense's — maybe even the team's — ceiling dramatically if it holds. Safety Rod Moore, approved for a sixth year after being limited the last two with a knee injury, appears to be close to 100 percent and ready to take his rightful place as the quarterback of the Michigan defense.

If both hold true, it will be a serious shot in the arm for a group with potential. The Michigan secondary was inconsistent a year ago, including the corners, and you couldn't help but feel that the group had more to give. The Wolverines finished 45th out of 134 teams in pass-efficiency defense, and while that wasn't all on the secondary — the pass rush wasn't good enough, either — there were some breakdowns in the big games you just can't have.

But new coaches mean a fresh start for a defense returning experience at two of three levels, and talent at the third (linebacker). While the defensive line received most of the accolades from the coaches this spring, the secondary wasn't far behind, starting at corner.

"We've got Jyaire, [Utah transfer] Smith Snowden, and don't forget, Zeke Berry was second-team All-Big Ten. Those three corners I expect great things from," first-year defensive coordinator Jay Hill said. "And [sophomore] Shamari Earls is as talented as anyone. I really like those four.

"From there, we need two or three other guys to step up, but those four I think are as good as anybody in the country has right now. I'm excited to see how they continue to progress."

If true, the Wolverines should have one of the better secondaries in the Big Ten, even with the corner depth uncertainty. Losing sophomore Jayden Sanders to Notre Dame didn't help there, but landing Snowden helped ease the sting. The Utah transfer and Hill should be an outstanding starting duo, especially if Hill takes another step forward in his development.

Early in his career, Hill was susceptible to double moves, and there were questions about his mental preparedness. Last year, though, he earned honorable mention All-Big Ten honors and was the team's Defensive Skill Player of the Year after starting in all 13 games at defensive back, notching 36

tackles, including 3 for loss and a sack, forcing a fumble, and breaking up 6 passes. He also notched 1 interception, though he had opportunities for several others.

The veteran of 29 games (22 starts) has all the skills to be a great one. He and Berry both showed they could be efficient in man and zone coverage in the spring, Jay Hill reported, their learning and application "really standing out" to Gilford. Both showed a high IQ for the game, as well, as you'd expect for a pair that have played a lot of football.

Berry has been called upon to play every position in the secondary, and he figures to play a lot of nickel this season. That will put more on Earls' plate, as well.

"All four of those guys are going to play a lot," Jay Hill said. "We've got to have a rotation to keep them fresh for the way we play.

"I would anticipate Smith and Zeke being the nickel guys inside, and we need strong nickels. For our defense to be great, we need a strong nickel."

Snowden missed time this spring recovering from injury, but experience and familiarity with the new defense gives him a leg up on the competition. Those familiar with his game echoed what we heard from those who saw him after he began working again — his versatility is a strong suit.

At Utah, he played both boundary and field corner, showing he could cover the slot or play nickel. His 43.9 percent allowed reception rate was reportedly the best in the Big 12 among corners with at least 300 coverage snaps last season, one of the reasons he became a second-team All-Big 12 selection.

Though Snowden was limited this spring, Gilford noted when he got on the field, it was evident he could really play. Jay Hill concurred.

"We love Snowden," he said. "I've seen him up close and in person, seen him play in games I've coached in, watched him on film a lot. He was a guy in high school I loved and tried to get. I know what he's about."

Earls was hurt early last year, but offensive players and coaches were talking about him as a potential future star. He just needed reps and confidence.

"He's a big, long guy who can run, had his ups and downs," Gilford reported. "But by the end of spring ball, he came around."

But who else is going to step up? Junior Jo'Ziah Edmond has shown flashes, and it seems like it's now or never. Beyond that, it's up to Gilford to develop some more depth here, get them to trust themselves. That comes with experience and time spent in the film room, he said, and that's one of the biggest challenges he issued to his group this year — to make the most of their down time by working with teammates and then breaking down film.

It's a complex defense after all, as head coach Kyle Whittingham noted on the spring media circuit. The Wolverines "will be bringing a lot of pressure, a lot of man coverage, mixing some zone pressures" with "a little bit of split safety look," he said. That means more pressure on this group, and Gilford noted the aspect most emphasized was man-to-man techniques, along with the "mindset of competing."

Aggressively preventing the catch is goal No. 1, Gilford said. But putting bad plays behind them is every bit as important, and he's seen a lot of progress.

"I'll be 100 percent honest with you — we have some talent. We have probably half the group that can *play*, play," he said.

DEFENSIVE BACKS

	CORNERBACKS
10	Zeke Berry (5-11, 196), Gr.
2	Shamari Earls (6-2, 205), So.
16	Jo'Ziah Edmond (6-1, 185), Jr.
0	Jyaire Hill (6-2, 190), Sr.
32	Jeremiah Lowe (5-11, 180), Jr.
3	Smith Snowden (5-10, 185), Sr.
28	I'Marion Stewart (5-11, 180), Jr.
24	Jamarion Vincent (6-2, 170), Fr.

	SAFETIES
20	Chris Bracy (6-1, 195), Jr.
25	Mason Curtis (6-5, 211), Jr.
22	Jordan Deck (6-2, 190), Fr.
1	Rod Moore (6-0, 198), Gr.
27	Ernest Nunley (6-0, 180), Fr.
5	Jacob Oden (6-1, 205), Jr.
26	Taylor Tatum (5-10, 212), Jr.
28	Kainoa Winston (5-11, 204), So.
6	Jordan Young (6-0, 195), So.

PRESEASON ANALYSIS

STARTERS ★★★★

We're giving this group a bump assuming Rod Moore will be back to full health and the player he was before his injury. The veteran safety is one of the most instinctive players in college football, and when healthy one of the top secondary players in the Big Ten. Jyaire Hill wowed the new coaching staff with his physical skills this spring and could be an NFL guy with a bit more consistency, while Utah transfer Smith Snowden is another who could be among the best corners in the conference.

Grad senior Zeke Berry has played a lot of football at Michigan, while junior Mason Curtis got better last year. Memphis transfer Chris Bracy also impressed this spring and could start. That's a very talented top five within that group.

DEPTH ★★★½

Finding third and fourth corners is going to be a key, and the hope is that sophomore Shamari Earls continues to perform how he did at the end of spring. He's long and talented, and he improved. There's a lot of talent at safety in addition to those listed above, starting with 6-0 sophomore Jordan Young. He made some big plays last year, including one massive one in the tight win at Northwestern.

Junior Kainoa Winston was a highly rated prep who could make a move, and fellow junior Jacob Oden will also vie for playing time after seeing action in 10 games in the defensive backfield last year.

OVERALL ★★★★

If this crew stays healthy, it should be one of the Big Ten's best. Snowden is a fantastic talent, while Moore could be the team's most pleasant surprise if he comes back at full strength. He's expected to be, and it's not as though he forgot how to play the game.

The key will be to develop a few players behind the starters. Head coach Kyle Whittingham said he liked the starting corners, but he added they needed a few guys to step up behind them. It will be the same at safety, though there are a lot of strong candidates.

We like this group.

X-FACTOR

Sophomore safety **JORDAN YOUNG** fared well in limited action last year, including getting thrown into the fire late in a win against Northwestern at Wrigley Field, coming down with a massive pass breakup late that kept U-M in the game. He will play a bigger role in the safety rotation this season and has a shot to compete for a starting job on the back end.

The rest will be asked to learn, and to learn quickly.

"One big thing for that group is jelling," Hill said. "Communication, jelling, playing together … there's a lot to that. But I do like that group a lot."

Safeties Stepping Up This Spring

With or without Moore, the back end of the defense figures to be a strength of this year's defense given the experience returning and players added. But getting the graduate back healthy for a sixth year would raise the ceiling tremendously, and Hill knows it.

Moore praised his defensive coach for keeping tabs on his progress, noting they'd already bonded as a result.

"I love him. He's a great person, a great kid," Hill said. "You've seen his playmaking ability. The thing I see from him, he has the knack to make the huge play at the most important time. Not everybody has that. In fact, very few people have that. It just seems like he's that guy.

"I've not seen him live in person, because he didn't really take many spring reps. But man, am I excited about when I finally get to do that."

One he did see — Memphis transfer Chris Bracy, one of the overlooked portal transfers according to rankings. Though he only checked in at No. 1,799 overall, the senior didn't take long to make an impression in Stockton's group.

Bracy was third on the Tigers in tackles a year ago with 81, and he also had an interception, 9.5 tackles for loss, 9 passes broken up, and a fumble forced. His teammates loved what they saw from him this spring, calling him a great fit.

"I'll say he's pretty balanced between being able to play the run and being great in coverage," linebacker Troy Bowles said. "I think that's pretty useful for our defense."

To say the least. Bracy started his career playing two seasons at UAB, seeing action in 15 games and starting just two. But his contributions for Memphis last season stood out. He played 869 snaps in 11 starts for the Tigers in 2025, split evenly between nickel and deep safety, and thrived mostly in the slot. He notched an impressive 91.8 grade in the run game per Pro Football Focus, and Hill plans on moving him around this year.

"I'm getting better at both," Bracy said of his success against the run versus pass. "If you watch my stats last year, I guess you could say the run game [was my strength], but I like to say my coverage skills are pretty good, as well."

Hill gave him one area in which to improve over the summer.

"He just wants me to get smarter IQ," Bracy said. "I asked him that question very early in the spring, just things that I can get better at. I come see him, watch film with him, try to learn things that he sees on the field so I can start seeing certain things."

Hill was pleased with the progress and excited for what Bracy can bring.

"He was a great addition," Hill said. "He did a great job. He was physical. He's got a good knack for the game, sees it well. He was very good."

Two others will be vying for time, and both showed great potential when they first arrived on campus. Junior Mason Curtis (6-5, 211) was tried at three positions before he ended up at safety, and then he showed he was versatile enough even to play nickel, rare for his size.

Former defensive coordinator Wink Martindale praised how the ball always "found" him, comparing him to former U-M great Ty Law in that sense because he understood what his job was and how to do it. He and sophomore Jordan Young figure to be the first pair behind Moore and Bracy, and both have had their moments.

Curtis played in 11 games with three starts at defensive back, notching 34 tackles, including 2 for loss, a sack, 2 passes broken up, and 1 pick. Young notched 15 tackles and 3 breakups in 10 games and shared defensive player of the game honors after a great performance at Northwestern.

"I thought they both got better this spring," Hill said. "Both showed that they're good enough to start in the Big Ten. I do believe understanding watching film and continuing to develop their craft will be critical, but yeah, those guys did a good job."

They'll be pushed by junior Jacob Oden (6-1, 205), sophomore Kainoa Winston (5-11, 204), Oklahoma junior transfer Taylor Tatum (5-10, 212) and freshman Ernest Nunley (6-0, 180). All were highly recruited and have the ability to play in the Big Ten.

Between the corners and the safeties, Hill likes his group.

"We have a chance to be very good back there," he said.

How good, we'll know soon enough. ❑

Year-By-Year Passing Defense Stats

Season	Yards	Yards/Game	TDs Allowed
2016	1,853	142.5	11
2017	1,951	150.1	11
2018	1,921	147.8	14
2019	2,412	185.5	16
2020*	1,533	255.5	12
2021	2,862	204.4	17
2022	2,719	194.2	11
2023	2,355	157.0	8
2024	2,812	216.3	19
2025	2,748	211.4	27

Only played six games in 2020

[FYI]

- U-M enters the 2026 season with great veteran depth at cornerback with senior **Jyaire Hill** (710 snaps played in 2025) and graduate students **Zeke Berry** (562) and **Smith Snowden** (632) at the top of the depth chart. Each was an all-league performer last year, with Snowden making his mark in the Big 12 at Utah. The trio combined for 1,904 snaps in 2025 and is expected to fill out the two starting corner spots along with the nickel position.
- Defensive coordinator **Jay Hill**, who also coached the safeties at BYU from 2022-25, helped lead a pass defense that racked up 17 interceptions (seventh nationally) in 2025 and a nation-leading 22 interceptions during the 2024 season. Last year, the Cougars were also No. 5 in red zone defense (70.4 percent), No. 10 in defensive TDs (3), No. 14 in turnovers gained (24), No. 19 in third down defense (33 percent), No. 21 in scoring defense and No. 25 in pass efficiency defense (116.97 rating). During the 2024 campaign, the group was 20th nationally in passing yards allowed (182.5).
- Graduate safety **Rod Moore**, back for a sixth season in Ann Arbor, could become just the second player ever to be a three-time captain of the football program. Horace Greely Prettyman is the only other player to be elected three times, serving from 1884-86. Despite being limited to three games over the last two years, Moore was elected a captain prior to both the 2024 and 2025 seasons.

POSITION COACHES

Defensive back coaching duties will be split between **Jernaro Gilford** (cornerbacks) and **Tyler Stockton** (safeties), both entering their first seasons at U-M.

Gilford spent the last 10 seasons coaching the cornerbacks at BYU, where he overlapped with defensive coordinator Jay Hill over the last three seasons. Prior to the 2025 campaign, he was elevated to the defensive passing game coordinator in Provo. Gilford has helped 10 players reach the NFL, including three draft picks, and helped seven players collect nine all-conference honors, including four since the 2023 season, BYU's first in the Big 12. BYU's secondary had three seasons with a top-30 ranking in passing yards allowed and four seasons with a top-30 mark in pass efficiency defense. The secondary produced 15-plus interceptions and a top-20 mark in that category six times, including each of the last three years. Gilford got his start in coaching at Whittier College as a graduate assistant in 2012-13 before a two-year stint at Southern Utah in 2014-15 coaching the secondary.

Stockton brings 12 years of experience to Ann Arbor, including eight years in a coordinator role. He is a three-time nominee for the Broyles Award (2020, 2022-23), given to college football's top assistant coach. He was named to the AFCA's 35 Under 35 list in 2021 and ESPN's 45 minority coaches under 45 list in 2022. Stockton spent the last two seasons at Boise State, where he served as a co-defensive coordinator and safeties coach. He previously worked at Ball State from 2019-23, where he worked his way to defensive coordinator in addition to assistant head coach duties in his final two seasons. The 2013 Notre Dame graduate started at UConn as a grad assistant in 2014-15 before working at Western Illinois from 2016-18.

QUICK FACTS

Position Coaches: Jernaro Gilford (cornerbacks, first year at U-M) and Tyler Stockton (safeties, first year at U-M)

Returning Starters: Rod Moore (29 career starts), Zeke Berry (23), Jyaire Hill (22)

Departing Starters: TJ Metcalf (23), Brandyn Hillman (12)

Projected New Starters: Chris Bracy (13; 11 at Memphis, 2 at UAB)

Top Reserves: Shamari Earls, Jo'Ziah Edmond, Jordan Young, Mason Curtis (3)

Newcomers: Jordan Deck, Ernest Nunley, Jamarion Vincent

Moved In: Bracy, Smith Snowden (24 starts at Utah)

Moved Out: Hillman (Virginia), TJ Metcalf (Tennessee), Tevis Metcalf (Tennessee), Elijah Dotson (Missouri), Jayden Sanders (Notre Dame)

Rookie Impact: None

Most Improved Player: Young

Best Pro Prospect: Hill

RETURNING PLAYERS

ZEKE BERRY • CB
Gr. • Pittsburg, Calif.
Ht.: 5-11 • Wt.: 196

- Started 11 games with 33 tackles and 11 passes defended with an interception, earning All-Big Ten honors (second team, media; third team, coaches) in 2025.
- Played in all 13 contests with 12 starts and earned honorable mention All-Big Ten recognition in 2024.
- Began the year as Michigan's nickel back but moved to outside corner in the back half of the season.
- Totaled 37 tackles, including 2.5 for loss, 2 interceptions, 9 pass breakups and 2 quarterback hurries.
- Appeared in 11 games in 2023, mostly on special teams, making 3 total tackles.
- Played in two games as a freshman in 2022, recording 1 tackle for loss and keeping his redshirt intact.
- Named an All-American Bowl honoree and Defensive Player of the Year by the bowl.
- Participated in the Polynesian Bowl following his senior campaign.
- First-team selection on the MaxPreps California All-State team as a senior and a second-team honoree as a junior.
- Made 35 tackles, 3 sacks, 1 interception and 2 forced fumbles as a senior.
- Listed as a four-star recruit, the No. 146 overall player and 11th-best safety nationally, and the No. 10 prospect in California by the On3 Industry Ranking.

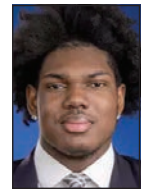
Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	PBU	INT
2022	2/0	1	1	0	0
2023	11/0	3	0	0	0
2024	13/12	37	2.5	9	2
2025	11/11	33	0	11	1
Total	**37/23**	**64**	**3.5**	**20**	**3**

MASON CURTIS • S
Jr. • Nashville, Tenn.
Ht.: 6-5 • Wt.: 211

- Made 11 appearances with three starts in 2025, recording 34 tackles, 2 tackles for loss, a sack, 2 passes defended and an interception.
- Appeared in nine games as a freshman in 2024, registering 8 tackles, including 1 for loss, and his first career interception, which came against Northwestern.
- Switched from edge (signee) to linebacker (spring 2024) to safety (2024 season) in his first calendar year with the program.
- Graduate of Ensworth High School, where he totaled 31 tackles, 3 tackles for loss, 4 passes defended, 4 fumble recoveries and 2 defensive touchdowns as a senior.
- Also lettered in basketball.
- Rivals Industry Ranking of four stars, the No. 322 player and 26th-ranked linebacker nationally, and the ninth-best player in Tennessee.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	PBU	INT
2022	2/0	1	1	0	0
2023	11/0	3	0	0	0
2024	13/12	37	2.5	9	2
2025	11/11	33	0	11	1
Total	**37/23**	**64**	**3.5**	**20**	**3**

SHAMARI EARLS • CB
So. • Chester, Va.
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 205



- Appeared in six games as a freshman.
- Enrolled early at U-M in January 2025.
- Missed his senior season due to injury after totaling 25 tackles and 3 interceptions as a junior at Chester (Va.) Thomas Dale.
- The four-star prospect was rated as the No. 97 player and No. 13 cornerback in the nation and the second-best prospect in Virginia, according to the Rivals Industry Ranking.

JO'ZIAH EDMOND • CB
Jr. • Indianapolis
Ht.: 6-1 • Wt.: 185

- Appeared in two contests in 2025.
- Saw action in eight games as a freshman, making 2 tackles in 2024.
- Attended NorthWood High, helping his school reach the 2023 Class 4A state title game with 12-2 record.
- A 2023 Indiana Football Coaches Association All-State selection and IndyStar Top 50 All-State defensive honoree.
- Two-way prep player, making 64 tackles with 5 interceptions and a forced fumble, along with 65 catches for 505 yards and 7 touchdowns, and 204 rushing yards and 4 touchdowns on 26 carries as a senior.
- Transferred to NorthWood after three seasons at Warren Central.
- Rivals Industry Ranking of four stars, No. 123 player and No. 18 cornerback in the country, and No. 2 player in Indiana.

JYAIRE HILL • CB
Sr. • Kankakee, Ill.
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 190

- Started all 13 games in 2025 with 36 tackles, 3 tackles for loss, a sack, an interception, a forced fumble and 6 passes defended.
- Honorable mention All-Big Ten selection by coaches and media.
- Saw time in 12 outings with nine starts in 2024, generating 35 tackles with 5.5 for loss and 1 sack, 9 pass breakups and 1 interception. His first career pick came against Minnesota.
- Played in four games as a freshman in 2023, making 8 tackles and 1.5 tackles for loss.
- Was on a Kankakee High team that went 8-3 his senior season and was part of a Class 5A Illinois state runner-up squad as a junior.
- Racked up 42 tackles his senior season with 5 tackles for loss to go with 2 sacks, 3 forced fumbles and 3 interceptions.
- An all-state performer in track and field as a long jumper. As a sprinter, was part of two state championship-winning relays (4x100, 4x400).
- Four-star prospect, No. 166 player and No. 20 cornerback in the country, and No. 2 player in Illinois, per Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	PBU	INT
2023	4/0	8	1.5	0	0
2024	12/9	35	5.5	9	1
2025	13/13	36	3.0	6	1
Total	**29/22**	**79**	**10**	**15**	**2**

JEREMIAH LOWE • CB
Jr. • Lexington, Ky.
Ht.: 5-11 • Wt.: 180

- Played in two games in 2025.
- Did not see game action as a freshman in 2024.
- Attended Frederick Douglass High School, leading team to 8-5 record with appearance in Class 6A semifinal game as a senior in 2023.
- Named first-team all-state by the Louisville Courier Journal after recording 25 tackles with 1 tackle for loss, 1 forced fumble and 1 interception.
- Helped team to 15-0 season and the Kentucky 5A state title in 2022 and a state runner-up finish in 2021.
- Rivals Industry Ranking of three stars, No. 128 cornerback in the country and No. 9 player in Kentucky.

ROD MOORE • S
Gr. • Dayton, Ohio
Ht.: 6-0 • Wt.: 198

- Two-time team captain.
- Played in three games in 2025 with one start, making 6 tackles and an interception.
- Missed the entire 2024 season after tearing his ACL in March 2024.
- Appeared in 12 games with 11 starts in 2023, making 38 tackles (1 for loss), 2 interceptions, 5 passes defended and a quarterback hurry.
- A third-team All-Big Ten selection by the coaches and honorable mention pick by the media in 2023.
- Competed in all 14 games with 13 starts in 2022, tallying 71 tackles (most among U-M defensive backs), 1.5 tackles for loss, a half-sack, 7 pass breakups and a team-best 4 interceptions.
- Recognized as All-Big Ten honorable mention by the media as a sophomore.
- Appeared in 11 games in 2021 with four starts at safety and tallied 32 tackles and 1 pass breakup.
- Shared U-M's 2021 Defensive Rookie of the Year honors and also named Special Teams Rookie of the Year.
- Received first-team Division I All-Ohio accolades as a prep senior and honorable mention status as a junior.
- Ranked as a three-star recruit and the No. 27 safety in the nation by the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	PBU	INT
2021	11/4	32	0	1	0
2022	14/13	71	1.5	7	4
2023	12/11	38	1.0	5	2
2024	*Injured, DNP*				
2025	3/1	6	0	0	1
Totals	**40/29**	**147**	**2.5**	**13**	**7**

JACOB ODEN • S
Jr. • Detroit
Ht.: 6-1 • Wt.: 205

- Played in 10 contests in 2025, making 3 tackles with 2 passes defended and an interception.
- Appeared in four games on special teams as a freshman in 2024, maintaining his redshirt eligibility.
- Attended Harper Woods High School, coached by father and former U-M player Rod Oden.
- Selected to the U.S. Army All-American Bowl and named a PrepStar Top 300 All-American.
- Tabbed all-state for Divisions 3-4 by the Associated Press as a senior.
- Led team to Division 4 state championship in 2023, the first in school history.
- Posted 56 tackles with 14 passes defended, 4 interceptions, 2 forced fumbles and 2 defensive touchdowns as a senior.
- Competed in track, specializing in sprints, jumps and relays.
- Regarded as a four-star recruit, the No. 339 overall prospect and No. 29 safety in America, and the seventh-best player in Michigan, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

I'MARION STEWART • CB
Jr. • Chicago
Ht.: 5-11 • Wt.: 180

- Switched from wide receiver to defensive back in spring 2026.

Grad student safety Rod Moore is back for a sixth year after battling injuries the past two seasons.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

- Did not see game action in 2024 or 2025.
- Hauled in 38 catches for 909 yards and 9 touchdowns as a senior at Chicago Kenwood Academy. Also had 3 return TDs on special teams in 2023.
- Illinois 7A All-State pick as a senior.
- Selected to the U.S. Army All-American Bowl in 2023.
- Spent his first three seasons at Bolingbrook, where he scored 13 touchdowns as a junior.
- A four-star recruit, the No. 347 overall player and No. 53 wide receiver in the country, along with the ninth-best player in Illinois, per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

KAINOA WINSTON • S
So. • Washington, D.C.
Ht.: 5-11 • Wt.: 204

- Played in one game as a freshman, preserving his redshirt.
- Recorded 2 tackles in 2025.
- Gatorade Player of the Year in Washington, D.C., in 2024.
- Selected to the Navy All-American Bowl.
- A four-star recruit, Winston checked in as the No. 91 overall player and No. 9 safety in the country, earning status as the top prospect in Washington, D.C., per the Rivals Industry Ranking.

JORDAN YOUNG • S
So. • Monroe, N.C.
Ht.: 6-0 • Wt.: 195

- Appeared in 10 games with 15 tackles and 3 passes defended in 2025.
- Totaled 38 tackles, 14 pass breakups and 6 interceptions as a senior for Monroe (N.C.) High.
- Selected to the Navy All-American Bowl.
- Slotted as a four-star prospect, the No. 148 overall recruit and No. 13 safety in the country, and No. 6 player in North Carolina, according to the Rivals Industry Ranking.

NEWCOMERS

CHRIS BRACY • S
Sr. • Mobile, Ala.
Ht.: 6-1 • Wt.: 195

- Transferred from Memphis in January 2026.
- Spent two seasons at UAB prior to Memphis.
- Appeared in 31 games during his career with 11 starts, totaling 116 tackles, 10 tackles for loss, 2 interceptions and 3 passes defended between both schools.
- Made 13 game appearances with 11 starts in 2025 at Memphis with 81 tackles, 9.5 tackles for loss, 10 passes defended along with an interception, forced fumble and fumble recovery.
- Played in four games at UAB in 2024 with two starts, 18 tackles recorded with 2 passes defended.
- Played in 11 games at UAB in 2023 with 17 tackles, 0.5 tackles for loss and an interception.
- Three-star recruit in 2023 class, the No. 1,962 overall player and No. 170 safety in the land, and the No. 75 player in Alabama, per Rivals Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	PBU	INT
2023	11/0	17	0.5	0	1
2024	4/2	18	0	2	0
2025	13/11	81	9.5	10	1
Total	**28/13**	**116**	**10**	**12**	**2**

JORDAN DECK • S
Fr. • Little Elm, Texas
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 190

- Enrolled early at U-M in January 2026.
- Attended Lone Star High.
- Posted 106 tackles with 12 tackles for loss, 2 forced fumbles, 2 passes defended and an interception returned for a 96-yard touchdown in 2025.
- Made 111 tackles with 21 passes defended between sophomore and junior seasons.
- Also lettered in track and field (sprints and jumps).
- Honorable mention all-state honoree in 2024.
- Four-star prospect, No. 399 overall player, No. 31 safety in 2026 class, according to Rivals Industry Ranking.

ERNEST NUNLEY • S
Fr. • Carson, Calif.
Ht.: 6-0 • Wt.: 180

- Enrolled early at U-M in January 2026.
- Signed with Cal in December 2025 before entering transfer portal.
- Attended Western High after three seasons at Narbonne.
- Had 57 tackles, 5 tackles for loss, 2 forced fumbles, 2 passes defended and 5 interceptions in 2025.
- 2025 Division 4 All-CIF honoree.
- Also lettered in track and field (sprints).
- Three-star prospect, No. 1,043 overall, No. 97 safety, No 82 player in California, according to Rivals Industry Ranking.

SMITH SNOWDEN • CB
Sr. • Lehi, Utah
Ht.: 5-10 • Wt.: 185

- Transferred from Utah.
- Appeared in 36 games over three seasons with the Utes, making 24 starts
- Started all 13 games in 2025, making 37 tackles with 2 tackles for loss, 11 passes defended and 2 interceptions.
- Also started two games at running back and wide receiver, catching 13 passes for 57 yards and rushing 8 times for 40 yards and a touchdown.
- Earned second-team All-Big 12 honors.
- Attended Skyridge High, helping program to 6A state championship in 2022.
- Four-star prospect, No. 328 overall player, No. 37 cornerback and No. 4 player in Utah in 2023 class, per Rival Industry Ranking.

Year	GP/GS	Tkls.	TFL	PBU	INT
2023*	11/0	7	0	0	0
2024*	12/11	48	4	10	2
2025*	13/13	37	2	11	2
Total	**36/24**	**92**	**6**	**21**	**4**

** at Utah*

TAYLOR TATUM • S
Jr. • Longview, Texas
Ht.: 5-10 • Wt.: 212

- Transferred from Oklahoma in January 2026.
- Changed positions from running back to safety after arriving at U-M.
- Appeared in 12 games over two seasons with three starts, rushing 57 times for 277 yards and 3 touchdowns along with 5 catches for 41 yards and a touchdown.
- Played in one game in 2025, preserving redshirt.
- Made 11 game appearances as a true freshman.
- Also played baseball.
- Attended Longview High, becoming program's all-time leader in rushing touchdowns (53).
- Named to the 2024 Navy All-American Bowl.
- Four-star recruit, No. 40 overall player and No. 1 running back in 2024 class, per Rivals Industry Ranking.

JAMARION VINCENT • CB
Fr. • Waco, Texas
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 170

- Enrolled early at U-M in January 2026.
- Attended Waco Connally High.
- Recorded 34 tackles, 4 tackles for loss, forced fumble, fumble recovery touchdown, 11 passes defended and 2 interceptions in 2025.
- Also caught 54 passes for 839 yards and 12 touchdowns.
- 34 tackles, 2 tackles for loss, fumble recovery and 9 passes defended with an interception in 2024.
- Also played quarterback for two seasons.
- No. 150 overall player, No. 19 cornerback, No. 22 player in Texas, according to Rivals Industry Ranking.

NEW BEGINNINGS

Coordinator Kerry Coombs Provides A Fresh Start For Special Teams

BY CHRIS BALAS

It wasn't much of a shock to anyone last December when Sherrone Moore relieved J.B. Brown of his duties as Michigan's special teams coach. The Wolverines finished 87th nationally in net punting (38.43 yards per kick), struggling for the second consecutive year with Hudson Hollenbeck handling duties. They finished 51st in punt return defense (7.0 yards allowed per return). Even the usually reliable Dominic Zvada was inconsistent on field goals. The 2024 All-Big Ten selection was nearly automatic in his first year with the program, but he made only 17 of 25 kicks last season.

The surprises would come several days later, starting when Moore tabbed former Ohio State assistant Kerry Coombs to replace Brown, and then four days later when athletics director Warde Manuel abruptly fired Moore for cause. Perhaps nobody was more shocked than Coombs, who had just started working with the Michigan players when word came down.

But when new coach Kyle Whittingham was hired a few weeks later and mentioned there could be a couple holdovers from Moore's staff, many assumed Coombs would be one of them. Both had ties to former Buckeyes head man Urban Meyer — Whittingham as Meyer's defensive coordinator at Utah, and Coombs with two stints as an assistant at OSU. Each still had a good relationship with the former Ohio State head coach.

Still, it was a nerve-wracking few weeks for the 64-year-old while waiting to see if he still had a job.

"It was an odd time, to say the least, and someday when I write my book, it'll have a couple of chapters," Coombs said at a function in Detroit during the spring. "We had made the decision to come up here, and we were excited about that. In a span of 72 hours, our world got turned upside down, and we had no idea what we were going to do."

In early January, though, he was introduced with many of Whittingham's other assistants at a home basketball game. Michigan sports information confirmed his retention with little fanfare, and Coombs continued the job he'd held for three weeks in preparing the Wolverines for the Citrus Bowl game with Texas. That game alone featured some obvious improvement in the third phase, which couldn't have hurt the coach's chances to stick around.

In mid-March, Whittingham, a former special teams

Graduate Hudson Hollenbeck (above) averaged 43.2 yards per punt last year and was the holder for field goals and PATs. He will be challenged for the top punting job by UNLV transfer Cameron Brown.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

SPECIALISTS

—	Jacob Baggett, (6-0, 170), Fr., K
—	Cam Brown (6-2, 185), So., P
99	Trey Butkowski (6-0, 170), So., K
49	Nico Crawford (6-2, 235), Gr., LS
90	Hudson Hollenbeck (6-2, 206), Gr., P
46	Gavin Magorien (6-0, 202), So., LS
67	Trent Middleton (6-2, 225), Sr., LS
93	Hunter Robertson (6-4, 205), Sr., P
—	Jack Treutelaar (6-1, 220), Fr., LS

Season-By-Season Kicking Leaders

FIELD GOALS

Year	Player	Made	Att.	Long
2025	Dominic Zvada	17	25	56
2024	Dominic Zvada	21	22	56
2023	James Turner	18	21	50
2022	Jake Moody	29	35	59
2021	Jake Moody	23	25	52
2020*	Quinn Nordin	2	5	46
2019	Quinn Nordin	10	13	57
2018	Quinn Nordin	11	16	50
2017	Quinn Nordin	19	24	55
2016	Kenny Allen	19	23	51

PUNTING

Year	Player	Made	Att.	Long
2025	Hudson Hollenbeck	40	43.2	67
2024	Tommy Doman	49	42.6	68
2023	Tommy Doman	53	44.3	71
2022	Brad Robbins	43	42.3	64
2021	Brad Robbins	45	46.3	65
2020*	Brad Robbins	23	45.3	66
2019	Will Hart	51	44.2	61
2018	Will Hart	43	47.0	65
2017	Brad Robbins	64	40.4	58
2016	Kenny Allen	54	43.3	67

**Only played six games due to the COVID-19 pandemic*

coach himself, made it clear in his first press conference in Ann Arbor that he had high expectations for the group. Coombs would say this spring it's one of the reasons he and Whittingham connected so quickly and were able to bounce ideas off each other — the new coach knew the importance.

"Hopefully they're disciplined, play smart football, avoid sloppy, ignorant penalties, play the game the way it's supposed to be played, and we're good on special teams," Whittingham said when asked about expectations for his first year. "There are some telltale signs that you can look for to determine how well coached you are and how you're doing in that regard."

THEY SAID IT

"Special teams coordinator Kerry Coombs has done a great job so far. I love sitting in his meetings. A lot of energy, a lot of juice, and his schemes are really good."

— Head coach Kyle Whittingham

Only a month later, just before Michigan's spring game, he'd seen enough to believe they were in good hands on "the teams."

"He's an energetic guy," Whittingham said of Coombs. "He's a terrific addition for our staff and he has got a lot of juice, a lot of passion for what he's doing. I've got no doubt that we'll be very solid on special teams with him running the show."

Kicking Game Features New Faces, Opportunities

Coombs' first point of business is to improve both the kicking and punting games. There's only so much you can do without a kicking coach when a guy like Zvada struggles, and it seemed pretty clear the Wolverines needed an upgrade at punter, where they brought in UNLV transfer Cameron Brown.

Brown, a January commitment, didn't join the team until post-spring, but much will be expected of the Australian who spent his only collegiate season last year with the Rebels. A "rollout-style" kicker, the 6-2, 185-pounder made the most of his one and only season to date in averaging 43.8 yards per attempt (41.2 net) on 46 punts (long of 71), showing off a big leg and outstanding accuracy.

Of Brown's 46 kicks, 17 were downed inside the opponent's 20-yard line. UNLV finished 26th nationally in punt return defense, allowing only 4.77 yards per runback, and was 41st in net punting.

A native of Coolangatta, Queensland, Brown participated in Australian Rules Football and won multiple championships at the high school level in his home country.

"The punting game will improve," said former Michigan kicker Brandon Kornblue, who runs the well-respected Kornblue Kicking School and has a beat on kicking around the country. "The last two years were rough. It has to get better.

"The benefit of those guys in the college game is most of them, especially if it's Australia, have been practicing kicking a ball out of their hands. Soccer is different. Australian rules and rugby, that's a different skill, and they've been doing it since they were young. They've done it so long, it's more natural to them."

They're also consistent at hitting the ball to a certain area, and it's an advantage to the coverage team knowing where it's going, he added. If there's a defender in the punt returner's face, it makes it difficult for any return at all, even if it's an end-over-end kick.

"It's going to be a 40- to 50-yard net almost every time," Kornblue said.

At kicker, Pitt transfer Trey Butkowski (6-0, 170) was a Lou Groza Award semifinalist after walking on and making 19 of 22 field goals and 41 of 42 extra points. Though his long was only 47 yards, he showed off his big leg on social media this spring in booting a 72-yarder in practice.

"He comes in with great expectations and accolades, but as we've seen the last few years, just because you have one good year, it doesn't mean you're going to have a second," Kornblue said. "You have to have the right things in place with the snap and hold operation, and the coaching has to be there to manage the guys working, their schedule."

There will be elevated pressure at Michigan, too, he added. Time will tell if he can handle life on the big stage.

"But he has the tools to be really, really good," Kornblue said. "It's just a question of the intangibles. How does he handle success and being able to repeat that? He'll be under a little more of a microscope."

QUICK FACTS

Position Coach: Kerry Coombs (1st year at U-M)

Returning Starter: P Hudson Hollenbeck

Departing Starters: K Dominic Zvada, LS Greg Tarr

Projected New Starters: K Trey Butkowski, LS Nico Crawford

Top Reserves: P Cam Brown, LS Gavin Magorien

Wait Until 2025: K Jacob Baggett

Newcomers: Butkowski, Brown, Baggett, Crawford, Magorien, Jack Treuletaar

Rookie Impact: None

Most Improved Player: Hollenbeck

Best Pro Prospect: Butkowski

PRESEASON ANALYSIS

STARTERS ★★★½

Michigan picked up senior portal transfer Trey Butkowski after the frosh left Pitt following a season in which he made 19 of 22 field goals, an impressive 86.4 percent. His long was only 47, but he's shown off a bigger leg.

UNLV transfer Cam Brown will be an upgrade at punter, Aussie-style, after averaging 43.8 yards per kick last year. The long snappers are proven and there's confidence they'll be solid, and there are more than enough athletes for coverage and return teams, especially with sophomore Andrew Marsh running kicks and punts back.

DEPTH ★★★

We'll get to the point here — the starters need to stay healthy, though walk-on kicker Stuart Blake does have a big leg and kicked well in the spring. Senior Hudson Hollenbeck returns at punter behind Brown, but he struggled a year ago. There seem to be decent options at long snapper.

OVERALL ★★★½

We suspect the kicking game will be fine under Butkowski, who by all accounts had a very good spring. He missed a short kick in the spring game, but he was solid in practices and even showed off a big leg in posting a 72-yard boot on Instagram in the offseason. Brown has precision accuracy, and coordinator Kerry Coombs will tailor the punt game to his style. Marsh could and should be a weapon in the return game.

Hollenbeck handled the holding last year and should again, while long snappers Nico Crawford, a grad student, and sophomore Gavin Magorien will vie for snapping duties. Crawford came from Pitt, where he played in all 13 games as the team's long snapper, while Magorien comes to U-M after a season at Marshall where he played in 12 contests.

"Nico had been through our camps. He's been solid for a long time," Kornblue reported. "He has a good body for it [at 6-2, 235 pounds], and he's got the framework there to be successful."

As for the rest of special teams? It's up to Coombs to get the buy-in, and there were a lot of positives this spring. There's opportunity for guys who might not contribute in other ways, but even the starters are competing here. Sophomore Andrew Marsh is expected to handled kick and punt return duties after finishing 27th nationally in the former (23.6 yards per return) and showing promise with 4 punt returns for 45 yards (11.3 avg.) after taking over later in the season a year ago. Freshman Salesi Moa will likely get an opportunity here, too, and senior Smith Snowden has also expressed interest.

Overall, Coombs said, he likes what he's seen and expects his group to be successful.

"I love the way that the position players have embraced special teams, and that will make us better," Coombs said. "It's where fundamentals are taught to the team, and these kids have embraced it. Nobody came to Michigan to be the right guard on punt, but somebody's got to be the right guard on punt.

"Now you're taking a really good player, a highly recruited kid, and you're saying, 'OK — now you do this job.' If they're not motivated to do it, and they're not excited about it, they're not going to do very well. There are seven guys on every NFL roster that only do special teams, and people forget that's so important. But I like this group. I like it a lot." ❑

X-FACTOR

Michigan's punt return game in 2024-25 lacked execution and poise, but it may have found a solution last season with wide receiver **ANDREW MARSH** taking over punt return duties late in the year. Marsh took 4 punt returns for 45 yards along with 17 kickoffs for 378 yards last season, including a 51-yard return in the Citrus Bowl. The sophomore wideout is a gamebreaker on offense and could be a field-flipper in the return game under new coaching.

[FYI]

- The Wolverines finished 36th in the country in BCF Toys' special teams efficiency ratings, an opponent-adjusted possession efficiency data set representing the scoring advantage per non-garbage possession that a team's non-offensive and non-defensive units would expect to have on a neutral field against an average opponent. Michigan ranked fourth in 2024, 27th in 2023, second in 2022 and third in 2021.
- Michigan's last 60 field goals have been kicked by players who transferred into the program — James Turner (18-of-21 in 2023, Louisville transfer) and Dominic Zvada (21-of-22 in 2024, 17-of-25 in 2025; Arkansas State transfer). Turner (85.7) and Zvada (80.9) rank first and fifth, respectively, in Michigan history in career field goal percentage (minimum 15 attempts). The Wolverines are expected to have another transfer kicker starting in 2026 in sophomore **Trey Butkowski**, who was an All-ACC performer at Pittsburgh in 2025.
- U-M's punt return game was atrocious in 2025, with former wide receiver Semaj Morgan returning 13 punts for 30 yards (2.3 yards per attempt) with a long of 13 yards, ranking 170th in the nation. The Wolverines ranked 122nd in the country in punt return yardage with 18 total returns for 75 yards. The group also ranked 104th in kick return average (18.43 yards per runback) with 23 returns for 424 yards.
- Michigan added six new specialists this offseason in **Butkowski**, UNLV punter **Cam Brown**, Pitt long snapper **Nico Crawford** and Marshall long snapper **Gavin Magorien** out of the transfer portal, and kicker **Jacob Baggett** and long snapper **Jack Treutelaar** out of high school.

POSITION COACH

Kerry Coombs is entering his first full season with U-M after being hired by Sherrone Moore on Dec. 6, 2025. He served as special teams coordinator after Moore's firing through the Cheez-It Citrus Bowl and was retained by Kyle Whittingham.

Coombs is in his 43rd season coaching, working at the high school, college and NFL ranks. His last stop before the move to Ann Arbor was Cincinnati, where he served as special teams coordinator and cornerbacks coach from 2022-24. He coached in two stints with the rival Ohio State Buckeyes, working on Urban Meyer's staff from 2012-17, first as a cornerbacks coach and then as special teams coordinator in 2013. He returned to OSU as the defensive coordinator under Ryan Day, a role he held in 2020-21, after spending two seasons with Mike Vrabel and the Tennessee Titans in the NFL from 2018-19.

Coombs, a stalwart in the state of Ohio, got his start in coaching at Greenhills High from 1983-84 before a four-year stint at Lakota High as an assistant (1985-88). His first head coaching opportunity came at Loveland High from 1989-90 before a 16-season run at Colerain High, where he posted a 161-34 overall record with 10 playoff appearances and five state semifinal runs, including a state championship in 2004. He graduated from the University of Dayton in 1983 and was a member of the program's 1980 Division III national championship team.

RETURNING PLAYERS

HUDSON HOLLENBECK • P
Gr. • Collierville, Tenn.
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 206

- Entering his fourth season at Michigan after transferring in from Mississippi State.
- Appeared in all 13 games in 2025 as punter and holder, punting 40 times for a 43.2-yard average with 11 punts of 50-plus yards, 10 punts inside the 20-yard line, 10 fair catches, 3 touchbacks and a 67-yard long.
- Also recorded 1 tackle.
- Played in two games as a holder and one as a punter in 2024.
- Attempted 6 punts for a 46.2-yard average in the ReliaQuest Bowl victory over Alabama with a long of 69 and had 2 punts downed inside the 20-yard-line.
- Saw time in one game as the holder on an extra point against Indiana to mark his Michigan debut in 2023.
- Did not see game action as a freshman at Mississippi State.
- Kohl's Kicking ranked him as the No. 7 prep punter in the nation in 2022.

Veteran coach Kerry Coombs has brought energy and expertise to the Wolverines' special teams units since last December's Citrus Bowl prep.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Ohio Guy Brings His Expertise Up North

Kerry Coombs has been an Ohio guy most of his life, starting his coaching career in his hometown of Cincinnati in 1983. The longtime Colerain High coach (16 years starting in 1991) sent players to Michigan before moving up. He then made two stops at Cincinnati and two more at Ohio State, including as defensive coordinator.

In addition to his collegiate experience, Coombs also served as a defensive backs assistant with the NFL's Tennessee Titans in 2018 and 2019. In short, he's seen it all, and he brings an impressive resume to Ann Arbor in Year 1.

"I've known him since his first stint at Cincinnati [2007-11]," former Michigan kicker Brandon Kornblue of Kornblue Kicking School said. "I had a kicker that I was working with, one of the first I ever coached, who ended up there, so I've known and been aware of him since I've been doing this, 20 years now. He's always been respected as a guy who has been at this high level, been around [former OSU coach] Urban Meyer, many great coaches over the years."

One of his assistants, Garrett Clawson, is another Kornblue is familiar with.

"I like him a lot," Kornblue added. "From a coaching standpoint, that's a really good room right now.

"When [Coombs] came in, that was really exciting. There's a respect factor for what he's done, what he's accomplished over a long period of time. He brings stability to the position, understands the Big Ten and big-time football."

Coombs gives shot in the arm to an area in which U-M hopes to improve dramatically this year.

— Chris Balas

TRENT MIDDLETON • LS
Sr. • Fullerton, Calif.
Ht.: 6-3 • Wt.: 230

- Spent two seasons at UCLA before transferring to Michigan in 2025.
- Ranked as the No. 6 long snapper in the NCAA transfer portal, per On3.
- Hasn't seen game action as a college player.

NEWCOMERS

JACOB BAGGETT • K
Fr. • Charlotte, N.C.
Ht.: 6-0 • Wt.: 170

- Converted 6-of-7 field goal attempts for Providence Day in 2025, with the lone miss coming on a 51-yarder.
- Delivered 95 touchbacks on 102 attempts (93.1 percent) as a senior, a state high school record for touchbacks in a single season.
- North Carolina Independent School Division 1 All-State selection and first-team All-Charlotte Observer in 2025.
- Ranked a five-star and the No. 8 kicker in the 2026 class by Chris Sailer Kicking.

CAMERON BROWN • P
So. • Coolangatta, Queensland, Australia
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 185

- Transferred from UNLV.
- Averaged 43.8 yards per attempt on 46 punts in 2025, with a 71-yard long.
- Pinned opponents inside the 20-yard line 17 times compared to 3 touchbacks.
- Had 9 punts of 50 or more yards in 2025.
- Averaged 3.6-second hang time, ranking 12th of 15 qualified Mountain West punters.
- Attended Palm Beach Currumbin State High School in Gold Coast, Australia.
- Also played Representative Australian Rules Football with Queensland State team, winning four championships.

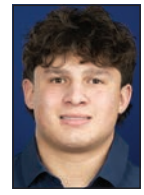
TREY BUTKOWSKI • K
So. • Orlando, Fla.
Ht.: 6-0 • 170

- Transferred from Pittsburgh.
- Appeared in 11 games in 2025.
- Converted 20-of-23 (87 percent) field goal attempts and 43-of-44 PATs (97.6 percent).
- Was perfect (14-of-14) on attempts from inside 40 yards.
- 2025 Lou Groza Award semifinalist.
- Attended Lake Nona (Fla.) High.
- Five-star kicker who was rated No. 9 in the country, according to Kohl's Kicking.

NICO CRAWFORD • LS
Gr. • Dublin, Ohio
Ht.: 6-2 • Wt.: 235

- Transferred from Pittsburgh.
- Also spent time at Illinois (2022) and Charlotte (2023).
- Appeared in 37 games in his career.
- Made 26 game appearances at Pitt in 2024-25.
- Played 11 games in 2023 at Charlotte.
- Walked on at Illinois in 2022 and did not see game action.

GAVIN MAGORIEN • LS
So. • Erie, Pa.
Ht.: 6-0 • Wt.: 202



- Transferred from Marshall.
- Appeared in all 12 games for the Herd in 2025.
- Attended McDowell High.
- Also played wide receiver and defensive back as a prep athlete.
- Five-star prospect and the No. 11 snapper in 2025 class per Rubio Long Snapping.

HUNTER ROBERTSON • P
Sr. • Huntington Woods, Mich.
Ht.: 6-4 • Wt.: 205

- Transferred to Michigan from Division II Clarion (Pa.) University in 2025.
- Appeared in one game as the holder on PATs and field goals in the Citrus Bowl loss to Texas.
- Appeared in 22 games in two seasons (2023-24) as a kicking specialist for Clarion, handling kickoff duties throughout his career with 15 games as a punter and five games kicking field goals/PATs.
- Averaged 43.2 yards per punt in 2024 with a long of 70 yards, and out of 51 total attempts, had 17 punts downed inside the 20-yard-line and 15 punts of 50 or more yards.

JACK TREUTELAAR • LS
Fr. • Libertyville, Ill.
Ht.: 6-1 • 220

- Attended Libertyville High.
- Committed to Michigan on Jan. 30.
- Four-star long-snapper prospect, as rated by Kohl's Kicking.

Will a different Big Ten team win it all this year after Michigan, Ohio State and Indiana each stormed their way to the title over the past three seasons? Oregon head coach Dan Lanning and his squad hopes so – a CFP semifinalist a year ago, the Ducks return 14 starters in 2026.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

BIG™ Preview

The Big Ten Conference Has Great Shot At A Fourth Straight National Champion

BY ANTHONY BROOME

The Big Ten sent three teams to the College Football Playoff last season in Indiana, Ohio State and Oregon and captured its third straight national championship crown, with the Hoosiers finishing off a dominant 16-0 season. Those three teams head into the 2026 season as projected top-5 caliber programs and title contenders and could once again headline the conference race.

Oregon brings back as much talent as anyone in the conference (the Ducks are tied for second nationally in starters returning with 14, trailing only USC's 15) and sit as the preseason No. 1 in the eyes of some of the pundits. Each of the Big Ten's three title-winners – Michigan in 2023, Ohio State in 2024, Indiana in 2025 – brought back key players from the previous season citing unfinished business. OSU fits the billing there, too, and Indiana is showing no signs of slowing down under Curt Cignetti. However, the Big Ten's "big three" could have some stiffer competition this year, and the league could provide an opportunity to get a fourth team into the playoff picture like it did in 2024.

Michigan and Penn State will be improved thanks to their new coaching hires in Kyle Whittingham and Matt Campbell, respectively. USC is on the verge of a breakout in Lincoln Riley's fifth season, and teams like Iowa and Washington could be lurking as dark horse CFP contenders.

The Wolverine's Top 25 Players By School

School	Offense	Defense/ST	Total
Oregon	2	6	8
Ohio State	4	0	4
Michigan	***2***	***2***	***4***
Indiana	2	1	3
Rutgers	2	0	2
USC	1	0	1
Washington	1	0	1
Iowa	1	0	1
Minnesota	0	1	1

Top 25 Players In The Big Ten

1. WR Jeremiah Smith, Jr., Ohio State

Arguably the best player in college football regardless of position and the potential No. 1 pick in the 2027 NFL Draft, Smith recorded 87 catches for 1,243 yards and 12 touchdowns in 2025.

2. QB Dante Moore, Sr., Oregon

The Detroit native turned down a potential top-five selection in the 2026 NFL Draft to return to Oregon for one more season, and he is in the mix for the No. 1 pick next spring.

3. QB Julian Sayin, Jr., Ohio State

The Alabama transfer threw for 3,610 yards with 32 touchdowns and 8 interceptions in 2025, was third in ESPN's quarterback rating metric (88.4) and protects the football with a 1.4 percent turnover-worthy play rate, second among FBS signal-callers.

4. OT Carter Smith, Gr., Indiana

The Big Ten Offensive Lineman of the Year and consensus All-American is currently pegged as a first-round NFL Draft prospect after allowing just 9 pressures and 2 sacks in 16 games for the national champions.

5. DE John Henry Daley, Sr., Michigan

Pro Football Focus' highest-graded returning EDGE in 2026 recorded 11.5 sacks and 17.5 tackles for loss at Utah under Kyle Whittingham in 2025. He was rated as the No. 12 overall player during the transfer portal cycle.

6. DE Anthony Smith, Sr., Minnesota

The versatile defensive lineman is coming off a monster season for the Gophers, recording 12.5 sacks. He was an All-Big Ten first-team selection by the conference's coaches.

7. DE Matayo Uagalelei, Sr., Oregon

His sack numbers fell from 10.5 in 2024 to 6 last season, but his 52 pressures ranked 11th among Power Four pass rushers, and he should be the highest player drafted from a stacked defensive line.

Ohio State junior quarterback Julian Sayin is back for another season as a starter. He threw for 3,610 yards with 32 touchdowns and 8 interceptions in 2025.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

8. QB Jayden Maiava, Gr., USC

Maiava threw for 3,711 yards with 24 touchdowns and 10 interceptions in his first full season as USC's starter, ranking second in the country in QBR at 89.9. Also added 54 carries for 157 yards and 6 touchdowns.

9. S Koi Perich, Jr., Oregon

The 2024 Freshman All-American spent his first two seasons at Minnesota before transferring to Eugene this offseason. His production dipped last year, but he has elite safety traits and explosive return chops.

10. WR KJ Duff, Jr., Rutgers

The 6-6, 225-pounder is one of the best perimeter receivers in the country, recording 60 catches for 1,084 yards and 6 touchdowns in 2025. His 22 contested catches led all FBS wideouts last season.

11. CB Jyaire Hill, Sr., Michigan

12. CB Brandon Finney Jr., Oregon

13. RB Jordan Marshall, Jr., Michigan

14. QB Demond Williams, Jr., Washington

15. G Luke Montgomery, Sr., Ohio State

16. DT A'Mauri Washington, Sr., Oregon

17. WR Andrew Marsh, So., Michigan

18. DT Bear Alexander, Sr., Oregon

19. DT Tyrique Tucker, Sr., Indiana

20. C Iapani Laloulu, Sr., Oregon

21. LB Teitum Tuioti, Sr., Oregon

22. OT Austin Siereveld, Sr., Ohio State

23. RB Antwan Raymond, Jr., Rutgers

24. OT Trevor Lauck, Jr., Iowa

25. WR Charlie Becker, Jr., Indiana

The Wolverine's Predicted Order of Finish

1. Oregon (12-0, 9-0 Big Ten)

The Ducks have been dominant the last two seasons with a 26-3 overall mark and a conference title in their first Big Ten season, but that success has not paid off in the postseason. Oregon got blown out as an undefeated No. 1 seed in 2024, and last year, head coach Dan Lanning helmed the program to a pair of CFP wins before getting blown out by eventual undefeated national champion Indiana in the Peach Bowl. Oregon brings back a loaded roster, including star quarterback Dante Moore, with a plethora of talent on both sides of the ball, including a nasty defensive line. Despite losing both coordinators to head coaching jobs, the program is well-positioned for a run at the first football national title in school history.

2. Ohio State (10-2, 8-1 Big Ten)*

There is never a whole lot of projection needed with the Buckeyes. OSU will be in the mix for a Big Ten title and a College Football Playoff berth, and it has what it needs to make a push for its second crown in three seasons. However, the Buckeyes have one remaining monkey on their back, looking to win their first conference crown since the COVID-19 season. Wide receiver Jeremiah Smith is the best player in the country, and quarterback Julian Sayin should lead another explosive offense, now overseen by coordinator Arthur Smith, returning four offensive line starters from last year. Matt Patricia returns on defense, but with several new faces to replace. Games at Texas and Indiana and home contests against Oregon and rival Michigan will define the season.

3. Indiana (11-1, 8-1 Big Ten)

At some point, maybe we will learn to stop sleeping on Curt Cignetti and the Hoosiers. They were expected to be bottom dwellers in 2024 and made the CFP, and few expected them to run the table en route to a national championship last season. There is a Fernando Mendoza-sized hole to fill at quarterback, but TCU transfer Josh Hoover could be up for the task with Michigan State defector Nick Marsh stepping into the wide receiver room alongside Charlie Becker. Both coordinators return from last year's 16-0 squad, and several contributors from 2025's No. 4 total defense are back. If Indiana takes down both Ohio State and Michigan on consecutive October Saturdays, it has the goods to enter the postseason undefeated for the second straight year.

4. Michigan (9-3, 6-3 Big Ten)

Coming off a tumultuous bottoming-out of the Sherrone Moore era, the Wolverines fell upwards into Kyle Whittingham, who spent three decades at Utah's helm and turned the Utes into one of the most consistent and respected programs in the country. He brought many of his key staffers over from Salt Lake City, and has a roster

Best In The Big Ten By Position

QB – Dante Moore, Oregon*
RB – Jordan Marshall, Michigan
WR – Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State*
TE – Jamari Johnson, Oregon*
OL – Carter Smith, Indiana*
DL – John Henry Daley, Michigan
LB – Teitum Tuioti, Oregon*
CB – Jyaire Hill, Michigan
S – Koi Perich, Oregon*
**on Michigan's schedule in 2026*

that (somehow) won nine games last season as the youngest team in the conference. Developing sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood is the biggest key to the season with a much better situation around him, and a defense that will be multiple in its looks. If Michigan can go 4-2 against Oklahoma, Iowa, Penn State, Indiana, Oregon and Ohio State, it could be a playoff team in Whittingham's first season.

5. USC (9-3, 6-3 Big Ten)

Lincoln Riley's fifth season leading the Trojans is his most important yet. USC has yet to make the College Football Playoff, and to do so, the Trojans will have to navigate a schedule that includes Oregon, Penn State, Ohio State and Indiana. Quarterback Jayden Maiava holds the keys to the season but will be breaking in a new set of playmakers. Riley also lured former TCU head coach Gary Patterson out of retirement to be his new defensive coordinator. Things are looking up coming off landing the No. 1 recruiting class in the country and returning 15 starters (the most of any Power Four school). Now, it's time for the Trojans to put it together on the field.

6. Iowa (9-3, 6-3 Big Ten)

Iowa has been a beacon of consistency under head coach Kirk Ferentz, winning at least eight games in every season since 2015, excluding the COVID-shortened 2020 campaign. The next step is busting through that ceiling and cracking the College Football Playoff for the first time. This might not be the year to reach that goal, especially with how tough the schedule is early, but there is a path to a strong second-half push. Iowa needs to figure out who its quarterback will be and faces more defensive question marks than it may be used to, but there should be little doubt that Ferentz will max his group out.

7. Penn State (9-3, 6-3 Big Ten)

The Nittany Lions sat atop many projected Big Ten standings last year, but the bottom fell out and James Franklin was dismissed halfway through the season. Former Iowa State head coach Matt Campbell took the job and brought several players with him, including quarterback Rocco Becht, in hopes for a smooth transition and immediate results in Happy Valley. PSU has a very manageable schedule to make that happen, and home games in October versus USC and at Michigan could determine whether Campbell can get his new program back to the College Football Playoff.

8. Washington (8-4, 5-4 Big Ten)

Head coach Jedd Fisch has the Huskies back in a healthy and competitive place after a solid 9-4 season in 2025, and this group has the potential to take another step forward and put itself into the CFP conversation. It all revolves around star quarterback Demond Williams Jr., who got some bad advice and tried to transfer before reversing course and returning to the Huskies. There are question marks on both sides of the ball, and they will rely on youth in many key areas. The runway is there with their schedule to get rolling early and build momentum, but Indiana and Oregon lurk in the last two weeks.

Wisconsin coach Luke Fickel is on the hot seat after posting two straight losing seasons in Madison (5-7 in 2024 and 4-8 in 2025). The Badgers catch a break and won't face Michigan in 2026.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

9. Nebraska (8-4, 5-4 Big Ten)

Nebraska finds itself in a precarious spot heading into Matt Rhule's fourth season in Lincoln. Star quarterback Dylan Raiola suffered a season-ending injury that led to a collapse, then transferred to Oregon. Portal signal-caller Anthony Colandrea brings improvisational skills to the position. The Cornhuskers have a new defensive coordinator in Robb Aurich (San Diego State) and return three starters from the nation's No. 3 pass defense. The ingredients are there for a hot start before a home game with Indiana and trip to Oregon in October, along with contests against Washington, Ohio State and at Iowa down the stretch. Nebraska could be improved, but with only incremental progress in the win column.

10. Minnesota (7-5, 4-5 Big Ten)

Head coach P.J. Fleck has been a stabilizing presence, winning 66 games over the last nine years and finishing in the top half of the Big Ten standings each year. Quarterback Drake Lindsey should be improved heading into Year 2, and the Golden Gophers could have a dangerous pass rush with Anthony Smith (12.5 sacks in 2025) and transfer T.J. Bush leading the way. Minnesota plays Washington, Michigan, Iowa, Indiana and Penn State this year, in addition to a non-conference tilt against Mississippi State. A sixth eight-plus win campaign under Fleck is not out of the question.

11. Illinois (7-5, 4-5 Big Ten)

The Illini have won 19 games over the last two seasons, but this feels like a transitional campaign for Bret Bielema's program. The Illini have to replace four offensive line starters and are navigating a scheme change on defense under new coordinator Bobby Hauck, transitioning to a 3-3-5 look. There is continuity on offense and, transfer quarterback Katin Houser could continue a trend of solid quarterback play in Champaign. Illinois has a chance to roll down the stretch if it can stay together through an early road trip to Ohio State and a visit from Oregon in October.

12. UCLA (6-6, 4-5 Big Ten)

UCLA saw enough from DeShaun Foster three games into the 2025 season to hit the reset button and change coaches. It landed on James Madison's Bob Chesney as its next program leader, hoping to tap into the pipeline that produced Curt Cignetti for Indiana. Chesney took over Cignetti's JMU program and made the College Football Playoff last season. He brought several Dukes players and coaches with him. With 41 transfers on the roster, it might be hard to predict how well things well go in Year 1, but this has a chance to work for all the same reasons it did in Bloomington. The ingredients are there to make a bowl game in 2026.

13. Wisconsin (6-6, 4-5 Big Ten)

Head coach Luke Fickell's seat is scorching hot heading into 2026. The good news is that everyone involved seems to take that pressure seriously. The Badgers overhauled their roster this offseason and look like they have the potential to get back to the run-first approach that has defined the program. The schedule is far more forgiving this year — that is, after the season opener against Notre Dame at Lambeau Field — and getting back to bowl eligibility should be on the table. Anything more than that requires a ton of projection and hitting on several best-case scenarios.

14. Northwestern (5-7, 2-7 Big Ten)

Head man David Braun was thrust into a difficult situation after Pat Fitzgerald's controversial exit in 2023, but he has largely managed to keep the Wildcats' heads above water, going 19-19 over the last three years. The program moves into the new Ryan Field this fall. Northwestern

also made a big splash by hiring Chip Kelly as offensive coordinator and pairing him with Michigan State transfer quarterback Aidan Chiles to go with All-Big Ten wideout Griffin Wilde and tailback Caleb Komolafe. This could be one of the more interesting teams in the projected bottom half of the standings, but the schedule could make it tough to push for a bowl bid.

15. Maryland (4-8, 2-7 Big Ten)

It is hard not to look at Maryland's roster and be impressed with some of the young talent. But that has always been sprinkled into head coach Mike Locksley's program without the results to back it up. He is another coach who finds himself on the hot seat in the Big Ten this season. Everything hinges on the progress of Malik Washington at quarterback heading into his sophomore year. The Terrapins also have a sneaky-dangerous pass rush with a pair of 2025 Freshman All-Americans in Sidney Stewart and Zahir Mathis, and five-star recruit Zion Elee should add juice there, too. There are winnable games on the back half of the schedule.

16. Michigan State (3-9, 1-8 Big Ten)

The Spartans were one of the most consistent teams in the Big Ten during the 2010s but are now on their third coach this decade in Pat Fitzgerald. Winning 110 games over 17 years at Northwestern is impressive, and Fitzgerald could bring some stability to East Lansing and get the program back on its feet again. This year's team feels light on playmakers and defensive line depth, but the schedule allows for some opportunities to stack wins in October against more evenly matched teams. We would not bank on MSU cracking bowl eligibility, but it is not outside the range of outcomes.

17. Purdue (3-9, 1-8 Big Ten)

While not the 50 new faces that last year's team had, Barry Odom and the Boilermakers will lean on 29 transfers to help push the rebuild forward in West Lafayette. Luckily, they avoid games against Ohio State, Oregon, Michigan and USC this year with a Big Ten slate that is a little more palatable. Purdue will face Wake Forest and Notre Dame in the nonconference slate, which will make it difficult to stack wins before the calendar flips to Big Ten play. A bowl game might not be in the cards, but neither is 10 straight losses to end the year like last season.

18. Rutgers (3-9, 0-9 Big Ten)

Greg Schiano's second stint in Piscataway has turned the program into a far peskier version of itself and a trio of bowl appearances since 2020. However, the Scarlet Knights have struggled to reach the conference's middle tier and might be primed to go backwards this season. Running back Antwan Raymond and wide receiver KJ Duff are two of the best at their position in the conference and could make Rutgers a tough out, but uncertainty at quarterback and question marks all over the defense could make for a season that spirals out of control.

**Head-to-head win over Indiana*

Returning All-Big Ten Players From 2025

Offense

Pos.	Returning Honorees
QB	Jr. Julian Sayin, Ohio State – 2nd, coaches and media
	Sr. Jayden Maiava, USC – 3rd, coaches
	Sr. Dante Moore, Oregon – 3rd, media
RB	Jr. Antwan Raymond, Rutgers – 2nd, coaches and media
	So. Bo Jackson, Ohio State – 2nd, coaches; 3rd, media
	Jr. Jordan Marshall, Michigan – 3rd, coaches; 2nd, media
WR	Jr. Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State – 1st, coaches and media
	Jr. KJ Duff, Rutgers – 2nd, coaches and media
	Sr. Griffin Wilde, Northwestern – 3rd, coaches
C	Sr. Iapani Laloulu, Oregon – 2nd, coaches
	Sr. Carson Hinzman, Ohio State – 3rd, media
G	Sr. Luke Montgomery, Ohio State – 2nd, coaches and media
	Sr. Dave Iuli, Oregon – 3rd, coaches
	Jr. Kade Pieper, Iowa – 3rd, media
T	Gr. Carter Smith, Indiana – 1st, coaches and media
	Sr. Austin Siereveld, Ohio State – 2nd, coaches; 3rd, media
	Sr. Phillip Daniels, Ohio State – 3rd, media
	Jr. Trevor Lauck, Iowa – 3rd, coaches

Ohio State receiver Jeremiah Smith is widely regarded as the potential No. 1 pick in the 2027 NFL Draft. He recorded 87 catches for 1,243 yards and 12 touchdowns in 2025.
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Defense

Pos.	Returning Honorees
DL	Sr. Tyrique Tucker, Indiana – 1st, coaches and media
	Sr. Anthony Smith, Minnesota – 1st, coaches; 2nd, media
	Sr. Bear Alexander, Oregon – 2nd, coaches and media
	Sr. Teitium Tuioti, Oregon – 3rd, coaches and media
	Sr. A'Mauri Washington, Oregon – 3rd, coaches and media
LB	Jr. Rolijah Hardy, Indiana – 2nd, coaches and media
	Sr. Isaiah Jones, Indiana – 3rd, media
	So. Mason Posa, Wisconsin – 3rd, coaches
DB	***Gr. Zeke Berry, Michigan – 3rd, coaches; 2nd, media***
	So. Brandon Finney, Oregon – 2nd, coaches; 3rd, media
	Sr. Robert Fitzgerald, Northwestern – 2nd, coaches; 3rd, media
	Jr. Zach Lutmer, Iowa – 2nd, coaches; 3rd, media
	Jr. Koi Perich*, Oregon – 3rd, coaches; 2nd, media
	Jr. Amare Ferrell, Indiana – 2nd, media
	Sr. Jermaine Mathews, Ohio State – 3rd, coaches
	Jr. Jaylen McClain, Ohio State – 3rd, media

**at Minnesota*

Special Teams

Pos.	Returning Honorees
K	So. Sean O'Haire, Maryland – 1st, coaches; 2nd, media
	Jr. Nico Radicic, Indiana – 2nd, coaches; 1st, media
	So. Ryon Sayeri, USC – 3rd, coaches
P	Jr. Bryce McFerson, Maryland – 2nd, coaches and media
	Jr. Tom Weston, Minnesota – 3rd, media
RS	Jr. Kenneth Williams, Michigan State* – 3rd, coaches; 2nd, media
	Jr. Jacory Barney Jr., Nebraska – 3rd, media

**at Nebraska*

Big Ten Championship Game

Prediction: Oregon 28, Ohio State 24

OPPONENT OVERVIEW

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

Michigan's annual showdown with Ohio State will take place Nov. 28 this season. Winner of four of the last five meetings with the Buckeyes, U-M is looking for its third straight victory at Ohio Stadium.

PHOTO COURTESY OHIO STATE ATHLETICS

Michigan's Five Toughest Games

1. Ohio State

Heading into the 2022 meeting, the Wolverines hadn't won in Columbus since 2000. Now, Michigan has pulled out two in a row there, winning 45-23 in 2022 and 13-10 in 2024. The Buckeyes have question marks on the offensive line and with how they'll reload on defense, but there's a lot of offensive firepower and a team that intends on winning the rivalry game in front of its own fans. The Nov. 28 showdown will be a major challenge, to say the least, but one Michigan has overcome in the recent past.

2. Oregon

This Nov. 14 trip is much closer to No. 1 than No. 3. The Wolverines haven't won a regular-season game on the West Coast since beating UCLA in 1989, losing six straight road contests against Pac-12 teams or former members of the conference. Oregon's defense is one of the best units Michigan will face all season, and Dante Moore is a top-flight quarterback.

3. Indiana

Indiana will come to Ann Arbor Oct. 24, and you know it's a tough schedule when the reigning national champions check in third on this list. The Hoosiers have a proven system under head coach Curt Cignetti and will be a force in the Big Ten for years to come. The 16-0 campaign in 2025 was one of the most impressive in college football history, for a number of reasons, including the Hoosiers' awful history on the gridiron.

4. Oklahoma

Michigan's offense will have to be ready for a huge test Sept. 12 at The Big House, with the Sooners touting an elite defense with playmakers at every level. The OU offense, meanwhile, was what held it back last season, and John Mateer is still the quarterback.

5. Penn State

Matt Campbell (Iowa State) was a solid hire, and Penn State should be much better than its 7-6 season a year ago. The concern for the Nittany Lions is how well a new group of players, including 24 transfers from Iowa State, will come together.

SCHEDULE BREAKDOWN

Opponent	2025 Record	2026 SP+ Ranking	Returning Starters (Out of 24)	Previous Opponent
Western Michigan	10-4	95	13	—
Oklahoma	10-3	12	6	UTEP
UTEP	2-10	129	4	Texas Southern
Iowa	9-4	22	7	Northern Iowa
Minnesota	8-5	45	13	Washington
Penn State	7-6	17	5	USC
Indiana	16-0	5	9	Ohio State
Rutgers	5-7	62	9	Northwestern
Michigan State	4-8	67	6	UCLA
Oregon	13-2	2	13	Ohio State
UCLA	3-9	46	7	Illinois
Ohio State	12-2	1	11	Nebraska

2026 Opponents In 1-138 Rankings

Team	Athlon	Lindy's	Avg.
Ohio State	1	3	2
Oregon	6	1	3.5
Indiana	5	5	5
Oklahoma	8	13	10.5
Penn State	18	23	20.5
Iowa	25	21	23
Minnesota	42	33	37.5
UCLA	43	54	48.5
Michigan State	72	65	68.5
Western Michigan	87	67	77
Rutgers	69	98	83.5
UTEP	130	132	131

Opponents On Preseason All-America Teams

OL Kade Pieper, Iowa — Athlon (1st), Lindy's (1st)
OL Carter Smith, Indiana — Athlon (1st), Lindy's (1st)
WR Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State — Athlon (1st), Lindy's (1st)
S Koi Perich, Oregon — Lindy's (1st), Athlon (2nd at returner, 3rd at safety)
OL Iapani Laloulu, Oregon — Athlon (1st), Lindy's (2nd)
K Tate Sandell, Oklahoma — Athlon (1st), Lindy's (2nd)
DL David Stone, Oklahoma — Lindy's (1st), Athlon (2nd)
LB Teitum Tuioti, Oregon — Lindy's (1st), Athlon (2nd)
DL A'Mauri Washington, Oregon — Athlon (1st), Lindy's (2nd)
QB Dante Moore, Oregon — Lindy's (1st), Athlon (3rd)
LB Rolijah Hardy, Indiana — Athlon (1st)
DL Tyrique Tucker, Indiana — Athlon (1st)
LB Isaiah Jones, Indiana — Athlon (2nd), Lindy's (2nd)
OL Trevor Lauck, Iowa — Athlon (2nd), Lindy's (2nd)
QB Julian Sayin, Ohio State — Athlon (2nd), Lindy's (2nd)
DL Anthony Smith, Minnesota — Athlon (2nd), Lindy's (2nd)
WR Charlie Becker, Indiana — Athlon (2nd)
WR KJ Duff, Rutgers — Athlon (2nd)
S Amare Ferrell, Indiana — Athlon (2nd)
TE Jamari Johnson, Oregon — Athlon (2nd)
LB Kip Lewis, Oklahoma — Athlon (2nd)
OL Austin Siereveld, Ohio State — Athlon (2nd)
CB Brandon Finney Jr., Oregon — Athlon (3rd)
P Grayson Miller, Oklahoma — Athlon (3rd)
RB Antwan Raymond, Rutgers — Athlon (3rd)
DL Matayo Uiagalelei, Oregon — Athlon (3rd)
DL Taylor Wein, Oklahoma — Athlon (3rd)

Ohio State's Jeremiah Smith is viewed as the top wide receiver in college football and projected to go as a top-five pick in the 2027 NFL Draft.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

MICHIGAN SCHEDULE SUPERLATIVES

Easiest Game: Sept. 5 vs. UTEP

The Miners went 2-10 last season, and Michigan is 14-1 all time against the Mountain West, the league UTEP is moving to from Conference USA. The lone loss, coincidentally, came against Kyle Whittingham's 2008 Utah team.

Trap Game: Oct. 3 at Minnesota

Head coach P.J. Fleck's team is almost always solid, and Minnesota has a lot of talent returning on offense. If quarterback Drake Lindsey truly becomes one of the top NFL Draft prospects at his position this season, Michigan could be in for a challenge in Minneapolis.

Best Road Environment: Nov. 28 at Ohio State

Ohio State fans believe it's their birthright to beat Michigan, even though the Buckeyes have only one win in the last five tries and haven't taken down U-M in Columbus since 2018. That stadium will be rocking.

Best Home Atmosphere: Oklahoma

Early fall weather, both teams likely 1-0 and the first-ever meeting between Michigan and Oklahoma in Ann Arbor will make for an electric afternoon at The Big House. This one will kick off at noon Eastern time on FOX, but the fans will be ready to go.

Best Road Trip: Oregon

Autzen Stadium is only the 11th-largest Big Ten venue with a 54,000-person capacity, making for a tough ticket. But Michigan fans who make the trip Nov. 14 will be rewarded with beautiful scenery. Eugene, the second-most populous city in Oregon, is situated in the Willamette Valley and features views of two mountain ranges, the Cascades to the east and the Coast to the west. There are plenty of opportunities to explore outside of the football game.

Factoid

Michigan has beaten Michigan State in four straight meetings for the first time since taking six in a row from 2002-07. The Wolverines will have an opportunity to make it five at home on Nov. 7.

Indiana defensive lineman Tyrique Tucker (95) and Oregon quarterback Dante Moore (5) are just two of the preseason All-Americans that Michigan will line up against this year.

PHOTO COURTESY INDIANA ATHLETICS

Opponent Position Groups Ranked Among The Nation's Best

Athlon Sports ranks the best position groups nationally every year in its annual preseason magazine. Here's where U-M foes from the 2026 slate checked in:

Oregon
No. 1 defensive line, No. 2 quarterbacks, No. 2 defensive backs, No. 4 wide receivers, No. 5 linebackers, No. 6 offensive line, No. 9 running backs

Ohio State
No. 1 wide receivers, No. 3 quarterbacks, No. 4 offensive line, No. 4 defensive backs, No. 7 defensive line, No. 8 running backs

Indiana
No. 3 offensive line, No. 3 linebackers, No. 4 defensive line, No. 5 wide receivers, No. 5 defensive backs, No. 9 quarterbacks

Oklahoma
No. 6 defensive line, No. 6 linebackers, No. 8 defensive backs

Iowa
No. 8 offensive line

WMU Will Bring Its Ground-And-Pound Attack To The Big House

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

Formerly the offensive coordinator at Louisville in 2022, Lance Taylor was hired following a 5-7 campaign from former head coach Tim Lester. It took Taylor a year, but he guided the Broncos to a bowl game in 2024 and broke through in 2025.

Last season, Western Michigan won the Mid-American Conference championship for the first time since 2016 with a 26-17 victory over Miami (Ohio), which had handed his team its only conference loss of the regular season.

Western Michigan lost its first three games — at Michigan State (23-6), versus North Texas (33-30 in overtime) and at Illinois (38-0) — before winning 10 of its last 11. The Broncos destroyed Kennesaw State in the Myrtle Beach Bowl, 41-6, to put an exclamation point on the season, which featured seven double-digit wins for only the second time in program history.

Building momentum off last season, the Broncos landed 10 transfers with Power Four experience and didn't have many notable departures.

WMU ran the football on 67.1 percent of its plays last season and has eight starters back on that side of the ball — highlighted by reigning MAC Offensive Player of the Year Broc Lowry, a dual-threat quarterback in his redshirt junior year. A transfer from Indiana (2023), the 6-foot-1, 210-pounder completed 63.4 percent of his passes for 1,803 yards and 9 touchdowns with 3 interceptions. He rushed 203 times for 963 yards and a team-leading 14 touchdowns, forming a two-headed monster in the run game with redshirt senior running back Jalen Buckley, who ran for 1,003 yards with a 174-yard performance in the bowl game.

Former Michigan running back Cole Cabana may be in the mix for carries in 2026, after missing all but two outings with injury last year. He scored a 4-yard touchdown in the spring game.

Lowry will have his second- and third-leading receivers from last season to throw to in redshirt junior Baylin Brooks (372 yards) and sophomore Aveion Chenault (277).

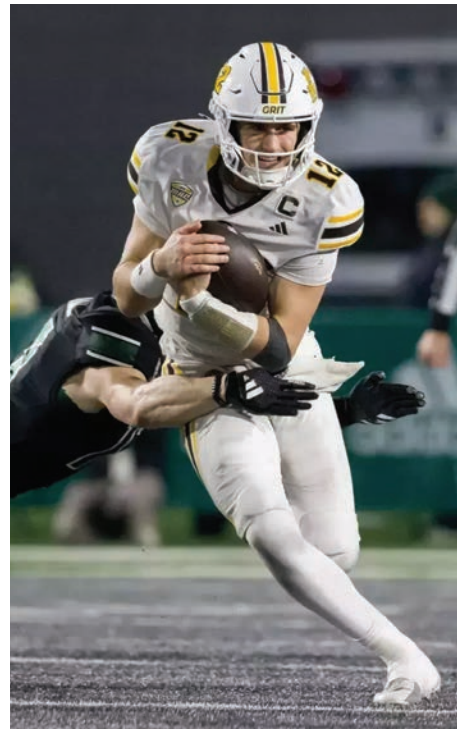
Four starting offensive linemen are back on a team that ranked 16th nationally in rushing offense (204.2 yards per game) and allowed only 1.6 sacks per contest (39th). Redshirt senior tackle Chad Schuster was tabbed as the MAC Offensive Lineman of the Year, and he's slated to make the move from right to left tackle.

In his first season as coordinator, Greer Martini coached up a unit that finished ninth in the country in scoring defense (17.4 points allowed per game) and 17th in total defense (305.5 yards).

The defense returns three starters, none of them in the front seven. The Broncos are tasked with replacing leading pass-rush specialists Nadame Tucker (14.5 sacks) and Rodney McGraw (7).

The secondary has experience, and third-team All-MAC selection Joshua Franklin is the headliner. He recorded 54 tackles, 5.5 TFL, 1.5 sacks and 10 pass breakups last season, while also serving as a punt returner (13.7 yards per attempt).

Both starting punter Ryan Millmore (42.4 yards per attempt) and kicker Palmer Domschke (13-of-19 on field goals with a 50-yard long) are back on a special teams unit with a lot of continuity. ❑



Quarterback Broc Lowry, the reigning MAC Offensive Player of the Year, rushed for at least 1 touchdown in each of WMU's seven regular-season conference wins in 2025.

PHOTO COURTESY WESTERN MICHIGAN ATHLETICS

2026 SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	2025 Result
Sept. 5	***at Michigan***	**—**
Sept. 12	MONMOUTH	—
Sept. 19	at Rice	—
Sept. 26	BOISE STATE	—
Oct. 3	at Buffalo	—
Oct. 10	KENT STATE	—
Oct. 17	at Central Michigan	W, 24-21
Oct. 24	at Toledo	W, 14-13
Oct. 31	BOWLING GREEN	—
Nov. 10	at Akron	—
Nov. 17	EASTERN MICHIGAN	W, 31-21
Nov. 24	MIAMI (Ohio)	W, 31-21

QUICK FACTS

All-Time Series: Michigan leads 8-0

First Meeting: U-M 17, WMU 13 (Oct. 10, 1917, in Ann Arbor)

Last Meeting: U-M 47, WMU 14 (Sept. 4, 2021, in Ann Arbor)

Head Coach: Lance Taylor (20-19 at WMU and overall)

2025 In Review: 10-4 overall, 7-1 MAC

Final 2025 Ranking: Unranked

Returning Starters: 13 (8 offense, 3 defense, 2 specialists)

Last Bowl Appearance: 2025 (Myrtle Beach Bowl vs. Kennesaw State, W 41-6)

RETURNING LEADERS

Passing: Broc Lowry (1,803 yards, 9 TD)

Rushing: Jalen Buckley (1,003 yards, 9 TD)

Receiving: Baylin Brooks (372 yards)

Tackles: Jarvarius Sims (64)

Sacks: Joshua Franklin (1.5)

Interceptions: Joey Pope (3)

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

- **Offensive continuity**
- **Dominant run game**
- **Special teams continuity**

QB Broc Lowry has steps forward to make with his arm, but leaning on a strong run game should be a staple for the Broncos again.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

- **Loss of pass rush production**
- **Need more dimensions on offense to compete at higher level**
- **Six road games**

WMU fielded one of the best Group of Six defenses last season but has a lot of pieces to replace, especially up front.

Oklahoma Building Off CFP Berth

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

Oklahoma is in run-it-back mode heading into the 2026 season, with the 16th-most returning production in the FBS, per ESPN, plus some reinforcements from the transfer portal such as former Michigan linebacker Cole Sullivan, who posted 44 tackles, 5 TFL, 3 interceptions and 2 sacks for the Wolverines in 2025.

Head coach Brent Venables broke through with a College Football Playoff berth in 2025, going 10-3 overall, earning the No. 8 seed and losing a home game to Alabama in the first round. Now that the Sooners got a taste of the playoff, they have their sights set even higher.

The Oklahoma defense, which will be called by Venables for a second consecutive season, should be elite again. The Sooners finished No. 6 in the nation in total defense (272.5 yards allowed per game) and seventh in scoring defense (15.5 points surrendered a contest) a year ago.

There are stars at all three levels, beginning up front with 6-foot-4, 266-pound redshirt junior end Taylor Wein, a second-team All-SEC performer. He recorded 39 tackles, including 15 for loss and 7 sacks, along with 1 interception last year. Junior defensive tackle David Stone, a mammoth at 6-foot-3 and 315 pounds, had 42 tackles with 8 for loss and 1.5 sacks. No team averaged more sacks (3.5) and tackles for loss (9.4) per contest last season, and the Sooners look like they'll be disruptive again.

As is the way of college football in 2026, a court case was consequential for Oklahoma. Redshirt senior linebacker Owen Heinecke was granted a preliminary injunction that gave him an extra year of eligibility in 2026, so he and classmate Kip Lewis are two returning starters on the second level of the defense. Those were the team's two leading tacklers last season, Lewis with 76 and Heinecke with 74.

Another second-team All-SEC pick, senior safety Peyton Bowen is one of the best defensive backs in America, and he's one of three returning starters in the secondary. He's appeared in 39 career games with 20 starts, posting 117 tackles and 2 interceptions. Last year, he tied atop the team with 7 pass breakups.

Redshirt senior linebacker Owen Heinecke (No. 38) was a second-team All-SEC selection by the Associated Press in 2025.
PHOTO COURTESY OKLAHOMA ATHLETICS

The offense must take a big step forward in its second season under Ben Arbuckle. That starts with establishing a run game, which was almost nonexistent last fall, with the Sooners ranking 118th nationally with 3.6 yards per carry and 113th with 118.5 yards per game. The top three rushers are back — sophomore running back Tory Blaylock (480 yards, 4 TD), redshirt senior quarterback John Mateer (431 yards, 8 TD) and junior tailback Xavier Robinson (421 yards, 4 TD) — along with three starting offensive linemen, so that's a start.

The 6-foot-1, 224-pound Mateer was electric behind center in the 24-13 win over Michigan in Week 2, but that was as good as it got for the Sooners. A hand injury hindered him, but his decision-making and overall development didn't live up to expectations. It's time for him to take a jump forward in his second season in the SEC and fourth with Arbuckle as his coordinator and position coach (two at Washington State). The Little Elm, Texas, native converted on 62.2 percent of his passes for 2,885 yards and 14 touchdowns with 11 interceptions in 2025. His yards per attempt were down from 9 at WSU in 2024 to 7.3 last year.

The top offensive weapon is redshirt senior Isaiah Sategna III, a 5-foot-10, 185-pound slot receiver who led the Sooners with 67 catches, 965 yards and 8 touchdowns a year ago, after transferring in from Arkansas. Redshirt sophomore Parker Livingstone transferred in from rival Texas, a big pickup, after he made 29 grabs for 516 yards and 6 scores last fall.

Oklahoma even has its starting kicker, redshirt senior Tate Sandell, and punter, redshirt senior Grayson Miller, returning. Sandell was first-team All-SEC in 2025, making 24 of his 27 field goals with a 55-yard long. ❑

QUICK FACTS

All-Time Series: Oklahoma leads 2-0
First Meeting: OU 14, U-M 6 (Jan. 1, 1976 in Miami)
Last Meeting: OU 24, U-M 13 (Sept. 6, 2025, in Norman, Okla.)
Head Coach: Brent Venables (32-20 at OU and overall)
2025 In Review: 10-3 overall, 6-2 SEC
Final 2025 Ranking: No. 13 AP, No. 10 coaches
Returning Starters: 6 (1 offense, 4 defense, 1 specialist)
Last Bowl/Playoff Appearance: 2025 (first round vs. Alabama, L 34-24)

RETURNING LEADERS

Passing: John Mateer (2,885 yards, 14 TD)
Rushing: Tory Blaylock (480 yards, 4 TD)
Receiving: Isaiah Sategna III (965 yards, 8 TD)
Tackles: Kip Lewis (76)
Sacks: Taylor Wein (7)
Interceptions: Eli Bowen, Peyton Bowen, Jacobe Johnson (2)

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

- **Elite defense**
- **12 returning starters**
- **John Mateer's potential**

If quarterback John Mateer and the offense take the next step, the Sooners could definitely make it back to the CFP.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

- **Mateer's development**
- **Offensive line struggles**
- **Losing seven draft picks**

Oklahoma has talent returning, but a lot of those pieces on offense have to prove they can take this team to the next level.

2026 SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	2025 Result
Sept. 5	UTEP	—
Sept. 12	***at Michigan***	***W, 24-13***
Sept. 19	NEW MEXICO	—
Sept. 26	at Georgia	—
Oct. 10	TEXAS	L, 23-6
Oct. 17	KENTUCKY	—
Oct. 24	at Mississippi State	—
Oct. 31	SOUTH CAROLINA	W, 26-7
Nov. 7	at Florida	—
Nov. 14	OLE MISS	L, 34-26
Nov. 21	TEXAS A&M	—
Nov. 28	at Missouri	W, 17-6

UTEP Is Mining For Success In Mountain West

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

UTEP endured its fourth straight losing season in 2025, going 2-10 overall and 1-7 in Conference USA, and the 2026 campaign isn't shaping up to be any easier. The Miners are slated to play road nonconference games at Oklahoma (Sept. 5) and Michigan (Sept. 19) in their first year in the Mountain West amidst a transition from Conference USA.

Geographically, UTEP is a better fit for the Mountain West, which features the likes of New Mexico, Wyoming and Air Force, and the increased television revenue matters a great deal, too; let's be honest, it's probably the biggest reason for the move. But the Miners have a long way to go to compete in any league, having had losing seasons in 18 of the last 20 years.

Head coach Scotty Walden, a 36-year-old entering his third season at the helm, has only won five games over the last two seasons and has made sweeping changes to the program, with new coordinators on both offense and defense and 32 incoming transfers.

The biggest upgrade is needed at quarterback, where there was a revolving door of rotation last season. Skyler Locklear (transfer to Missouri State), Malachi Nelson (transfer to Syracuse) and Shay Smith (moved to linebacker) all saw time behind center in 2025, and the results were subpar. UTEP passed for only one more touchdown than interception (21 to 20) and was tied atop the nation in picks thrown.

QUICK FACTS

All-Time Series: None
Head Coach: Scotty Walden, 5-19 at UTEP (third year), 32-34 overall (seventh year)
2025 In Review: 2-10 overall, 1-7 Conference USA
Final 2025 Ranking: Unranked
Returning Starters: 4 (0 offense, 4 defense, 0 specialists)
Last Bowl Appearance: 2021 (New Mexico Bowl vs. Fresno State, L 31-24)

RETURNING LEADERS

Passing: Shay Smith (14 yards)
Rushing: Elijah McCoy (47 yards)
Receiving: Jaylan Brown (103 yards)
Tackles: Jayden Wilson (92)
Sacks: Shakaun Bowser, Ekow Tayor (2)
Interceptions: Justin Content, Xavier Smith, Jayden Wilson (1)

Redshirt sophomore transfer quarterback EJ Colson comes from Incarnate Word, an FCS program that also produced 2025 No. 1 overall NFL Draft pick quarterback Cam Ward (Washington State, Miami) and QB Zach Calzada (Kentucky). A native of Byron, Ga., Colson began his career at Central Florida in 2024.

UTEP is looking for stability, and Walden believes Colson is the best option, naming him the starter after spring practices. The 6-foot-1, 190-pounder started 10 games for Incarnate Word last season, producing 19 total touchdowns (16 passing, 3 rushing). He completed 70.9 percent of his passes (210-of-296) for 2,142 yards. Notably, Colson threw only 4 interceptions.

Redshirt sophomore wide receiver Jaylan Brown hauled in a season-long 34-yard reception against New Mexico State.
PHOTO COURTESY UTEP ATHLETICS

His ability to take care of the football will be key, and he'll need a solid supporting cast to help him. The Miners have no returning starters on offense, but there's optimism that the group can grow. Colson is one of several potential starters that came from the transfer portal, and there are others who missed part or all of last season with injury that could slide in, such as center Jayden Trapp (transfer from Division II Texas A&M-Kingsville) and 6-foot-8 redshirt freshman right tackle Tyler Roberts, who was limited to three contests due to injury in 2025.

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

- **Upgrade at quarterback**
- **All-new offensive personnel**
- **Experienced secondary**

EJ Colson will add legitimacy and ball security at quarterback if he can successfully make the jump from FCS to FBS, and the defense has a lot back in the secondary.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

- **Tough nonconference slate**
- **Transitioning to a more challenging conference**
- **Digging out of a deep hole this century**

UTEP hasn't had a consistent winner since a stretch in the 1950s and is making the move to the Mountain West, which will feature more competition.

As a redshirt freshman in 2025, wide receiver Jaylan Brown, who spent the 2024 campaign at Michigan State, hauled in 10 catches for 103 yards and will be one of Colson's top targets along with redshirt junior tight end Cash Cheeks, who put up 171 receiving yards at Northern Colorado in 2024 prior to missing last season with injury.

Kyle Beyer is in his third season on staff and was promoted to defensive coordinator this offseason. He's implemented a 3-3-5 defense that has four starters coming back, including three in the secondary.

Redshirt senior safety Xavier Smith — a transfer who followed Walden from Austin Peay — is the leader, having recorded 60 tackles, 1.5 TFL, 4 pass breakups and 1 interception a year ago.

Shay, the quarterback turned linebacker, has a steady presence beside him to help with the position switch to linebacker. Senior Jayden Wilson exploded for 92 total tackles in his first season at UTEP following two years at New Mexico. He added 8 tackles for loss and 3 forced fumbles.

UTEP ranked tied for 110th nationally by allowing 30.4 points per game last season and is looking to take a big jump forward.

Sophomore Nik Henry is one to look out for on special teams. The 2025 C-USA All-Freshman Team honoree averaged 12.8 yards per return on kickoffs and 6.3 on punts. ❑

2026 SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	2025 Result
Sept. 5	at Oklahoma	—
Sept. 12	TEXAS SOUTHERN	—
Sept. 19	***at Michigan***	**—**
Sept. 26	OREGON STATE	—
Oct. 3	at New Mexico	—
Oct. 10	NEVADA	—
Oct. 17	SAN JOSE STATE	—
Oct. 31	at North Dakota State	—
Nov. 7	HAWAI'I	—
Nov. 14	WYOMING	—
Nov. 21	at Air Force	—
Nov. 28	at Northern Illinois	—

Iowa Has QB Battle, Questions On Defense And Changes On Special Teams

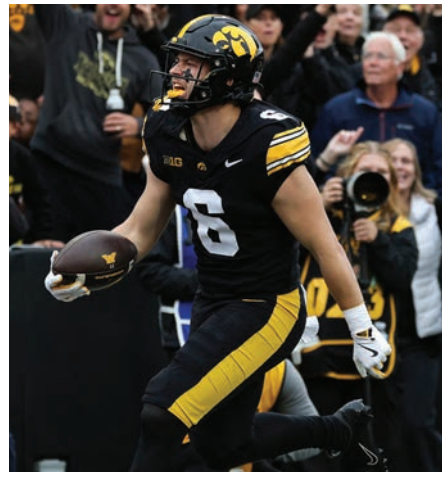
BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

When Kyle Whittingham and Kirk Ferentz open the Big Ten season Sept. 26 at Michigan Stadium, it'll be a battle of two of the most experienced coaches in the college game. The 66-year-old Whittingham has been a head coach since 2005 (except for a couple weeks last December), while the 70-year-old Ferentz's run at Iowa began in 1999.

Both coaches know how to engineer good football teams, even in today's era. Utah won 11 games in Whittingham's last season, while Iowa posted a 9-4 mark.

Iowa's four losses came by a combined 15 points — 3 to Iowa State, 5 to Indiana, 2 to Oregon and 5 to USC. The Hawkeyes' signature victories were a 40-16 blowout of rival Nebraska and 34-27 win over then-No. 14 Vanderbilt in the ReliaQuest Bowl. Iowa finished 17th in the final edition of both major national polls.

There's a lot of excitement about the offense heading into the 2026 campaign. Perhaps even more than for the defense, even if that's hard to believe with how elite coordinator Phil Parker's units have been over the years, including winding up top 10 in both points (16.1) and yards (280.4) allowed per contest a year ago.



Junior defensive back Zach Lutmer was named Iowa's most valuable defensive player in 2025.
PHOTO COURTESY IOWA ATHLETICS

The Hawkeyes were efficient running the football last season, averaging 176.9 yards per outing, and that looks like a strength again. The offensive line will reload after losing three NFL Draft picks, and junior left tackle Trevor Lauck — a 6-foot-5, 310-pounder out of Indianapolis — looks like the best of the bunch. He opened all 13 games last season, recording an elite 84.8 overall PFF grade.

Iowa has some skill position players that are proven producers. Both leading rusher Kamari Moulton, a junior running back, and receiver DJ Vonnahme, a sophomore tight end, are back in 2026. Moulton netted 878 yards and 5 scores on the ground, while Vonnahme broke out with 29 catches for 434 yards and 3 touchdowns. Junior wide receiver Reece Vander Zee is also set to take a jump in his development, following a 15-reception, 219-yard, 2-touchdown season.

The big question is who starts at quarterback, with junior Hank Brown and sophomore Jeremy Hecklinski in a battle that will go into fall camp. The 6-foot-4, 215-pound Brown was higher on the depth chart behind starter Mark Gronowski (undrafted free agent, Miami Dolphins) last year, and he started two games at Auburn in 2024. He plays much more similarly to Iowa quarterbacks of the past, while Hecklinski is more of a gunslinger with better mobility. Higher risk, but more upside? This is a big decision for Ferentz and offensive coordinator Tim Lester.

The defense is almost always near the top of the Big Ten under Parker, but there are legitimate concerns about the personnel, especially in the front seven. The defensive line lost six of its top eight players from the 2025 season and didn't bring in high-profile replacements. There are four transfer newcomers on the defensive line, but how well they'll step in is unknown.

There's a lot to like about junior nickel back Zach Lutmer, who might be the best player on the entire team. He's the team's leading returner in tackles (71), interceptions (3) and sacks (1), collecting second-team All-Big Ten honors.

Iowa isn't just losing its kicker, Drew Stevens, punter, Rhys Dakin, and almost all of its return men, but coordinator LeVar Woods departed to join the new staff at Michigan State after 18 years in Iowa City. Chris Polizzi was promoted from analyst to coordinator, but Woods is regarded as one of the best in the sport, a big reason why the third phase of the game has long been special for the Hawkeyes. ❑

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

- **Run game**
- **Solid receiving corps**
- **DB Zach Lutmer is back**

Lutmer looks like the next great Iowa defensive back. It's nice to have a star on the back end, and the run game should provide for a solid floor on offense.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

- **Stopping the run**
- **New special teams**
- **Not much returning production on defense**

Iowa's defense is rarely a concern, but the group has a lot to prove in 2026.

QUICK FACTS

All-Time Series: Michigan leads 45-15-4
First Meeting: Iowa 28, U-M 5 (Nov. 10, 1900, in Detroit)
Last Meeting: U-M 26, Iowa 0 (Dec. 2, 2023, in Indianapolis)
Head Coach: Kirk Ferentz, 213-128 at Iowa (28th year), 225-149 overall (31st year)
2025 In Review: 9-4 overall, 6-3 Big Ten
Final 2025 Ranking: No. 17 AP, No. 17 coaches
Returning Starters: 7 (4 offense, 3 defense, 0 specialists)
Last Bowl Appearance: 2025 (ReliaQuest Bowl vs. Vanderbilt, W 34-27)

RETURNING LEADERS

Passing: Hank Brown (107 yards, 1 TD)
Rushing: Kamari Moulton (878 yards, 5 TD)
Receiving: DJ Vonnahme (434 yards, 3 TD)
Tackles: Zach Lutmer (71)
Sacks: Zach Lutmer (1)
Interceptions: Zach Lutmer (3)

2026 SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	2025 Result
Sept. 5	NORTHERN ILLINOIS	—
Sept. 12	IOWA STATE	L, 16-13
Sept. 19	NORTHERN IOWA	—
Sept. 26	***at Michigan***	**—**
Oct. 3	OHIO STATE	—
Oct. 9	at Washington	—
Oct. 24	at Minnesota	W, 41-3
Oct. 31	WISCONSIN	W, 37-0
Nov. 7	at Northwestern	—
Nov. 14	PURDUE	—
Nov. 21	at Illinois	—
Nov. 27	NEBRASKA	W, 40-16

Minnesota's Returning Talent Offers A Chance To Rise

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

P.J. Fleck has done what's been asked of him at Minnesota, which is why he was given a new contract this offseason that brings his 2026 compensation up to a whopping $7.9 million.

Fleck snapped a 14-game losing streak to Wisconsin and has won four of the last seven battles for Paul Bunyan's Axe. He's taken the Golden Gophers to seven consecutive bowl games excluding the 2020 season, winning all of them, including last year's Rate Bowl against New Mexico, 20-17 in overtime. After a rough start against ranked opponents, Fleck's squads have won four games versus Associated Press Top 25 teams in the last three years.

The next goal is to get back to double-digit wins for the first time since 2019, though it's a tougher task with the expanded Big Ten.

The Golden Gophers have an over/under win total of 6.5 games in 2026, per BetMGM, with the 10th-most returning production in college football, according to ESPN.

Perhaps the best quarterback Fleck has had in Minneapolis is one of seven returning starters on offense. Redshirt sophomore Drake Lindsey is receiving a lot of preseason hype, with CBS Sports projecting him to be the No. 4 overall pick in the 2027 NFL Draft, the third quarterback off the board only behind Texas' Arch Manning at No. 1 and Oregon's Dante Moore at No. 3.

The 6-foot-5, 230-pound Fayetteville, Ark., native connected on 63 percent of his throws (246-of-389) for 2,382 yards and 18 touchdowns with 6 interceptions in 2025 and has a cannon for an arm.

Lindsey has weapons around him, including at wide receiver. Fifth-year senior Javon Tracy (37 catches, 454 yards, 6 TD) and junior Jalen Smith (28 receptions, 419 yards, 4 TD) were second and third on the team in receiving last year, respectively, and senior transfer Noah Jennings is another potential difference-maker following a 23-catch, 323-yard campaign at Cincinnati.

Fifth-year senior defensive end Anthony Smith was named a second-team preseason All-American by Athlon Sports.

PHOTO BY BRAD REMPEL/MINNESOTA ATHLETICS

Three starters are back on the offensive line, as is senior running back Darius Taylor. The Detroit native has had a stellar career, totaling 2,455 yards and 19 touchdowns, but has struggled to stay healthy for full seasons. The Golden Gophers were weak running the football a year ago, averaging only 103.2 rushing yards per game to rank 128th in the FBS. It's worth mentioning that Taylor averaged 5.2 yards per carry and 126 rushing yards per game when he was full-go and attempted 19 or more rushes.

The defense, on the other hand, did a great job stopping the run last season, holding opponents to 121.1 rushing yards per contest (27th nationally). The front lived in the backfield, registering 3 sacks (tied for sixth) and 7.1 tackles for loss (11th) per outing, led by fifth-year senior edge rusher Anthony Smith. The 6-foot-6, 285-pound beast led the Big Ten with 12.5 sacks, ranked eighth among the conference's edge rushers with 44 pressures and posted 17.5 TFL.

There's all sorts of excitement for the duo of Smith and senior defensive end Karter Menz, who had 6.5 sacks and 9 TFL in 2025. Defensive tackle, meanwhile, is a big question mark.

Oregon plucked junior safety Koi Perich to replace former Purdue transfer and eventual first-round NFL Draft pick Dillon Thieneman, leaving another Big Ten program in a lurch. The Golden Gophers will have to make up for his production; Perich played on defense, offense and special teams, earning second-team All-Big Ten honors last season.

The stud on the back end of the defense is senior cornerback John Nestor, a ballhawk who collected 6 interceptions to tie atop the Big Ten last season. He had a pick and fumble recovery in the 17-7 regular-season finale against Wisconsin. ❑

2026 SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	2025 Result
Sept. 3	EASTERN ILLINOIS	—
Sept. 12	MISSISSIPPI STATE	—
Sept. 19	AKRON	—
Sept. 26	at Washington	—
Oct. 3	***MICHIGAN***	**—**
Oct. 10	at Purdue	W, 27-20
Oct. 24	IOWA	L, 41-3
Oct. 31	at Indiana	—
Nov. 7	UCLA	—
Nov. 14	at Penn State	—
Nov. 21	NORTHWESTERN	L, 38-35
Nov. 28	at Wisconsin	W, 17-7

QUICK FACTS

All-Time Series: Michigan leads 78-25-3
First Meeting: Minnesota 14, U-M 6 (Oct. 17, 1892 in Minneapolis)
Last Meeting: U-M 27, Minnesota 24 (Sept. 28, 2024 in Ann Arbor)
Head Coach: P.J. Fleck, 66-44 at Minnesota (10th year), 96-66 overall (14th year)
2025 In Review: 8-5 overall, 5-4 Big Ten
Final 2025 Ranking: Unranked
Returning Starters: 13 (7 offense, 5 defense, 1 specialist)
Last Bowl Appearance: 2025 (Rate Bowl vs. New Mexico, W 20-17 in OT)

RETURNING LEADERS

Passing: Drake Lindsey (2,382 yards, 18 TD)
Rushing: Darius Taylor (670 yards, 4 TD)
Receiving: Javon Tracy (454 yards, 6 TD)
Tackles: Maverick Baranowski (103)
Sacks: Anthony Smith (12.5)
Interceptions: Josh Nestor (6)

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

- **Roster continuity**
- **Schedule on the easier side**
- **QB Drake Lindsey's ascension**

Minnesota will have a better quarterback than many opponents on the schedule and has a lot of returning production. Not playing Ohio State or Oregon helps, too.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

- **Run game**
- **Defensive tackle**
- **Losing S Koi Perich**

Minnesota has to make some key replacements on defense, and the running game was less than inspiring last season.

Penn State Has A Total Reset Under Matt Campbell

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

Penn State made the College Football Playoff semifinals in 2024 and entered last season ranked No. 2 in the Associated Press poll. With a third-year starting quarterback in Drew Allar and a roster full of elite talent that came back for one last ride (the donors went all out to retain them), it was the year the Nittany Lions were finally expected to seriously challenge for a national championship under James Franklin.

PSU didn't just disappoint in 2025, but the bottom fell out completely. Losing to Oregon in double-overtime in late September was frustrating but not surprising. The shocking part was what came next — embarrassing losses to UCLA and Northwestern, leading to Franklin's midseason firing.

Penn State redshirt junior tight end Andrew Rappleyea was once committed to Michigan in the 2023 class.

PHOTO BY MARK SELDERS/PENN STATE ATHLETICS

Matt Campbell wasn't PSU's first choice as the next head coach, but he was an excellent one. The 46-year-old Massillon, Ohio, native is the winningest coach in Iowa State history, taking the Cyclones to seven bowl games in 10 years and finishing top 15 two different seasons at a place that had never ended up that high before he arrived.

This offseason, PSU added 39 transfers, including 24 from Iowa State. That's a lot of new blood, but many of those players know the expectations for a Campbell-coached team, and his talent and character evaluations clearly worked well in Ames.

This team has a chance to make the College Football Playoff because of that and an easy schedule. The Nittany Lions will avoid Ohio State, Oregon, Indiana, Illinois and Iowa.

Experience at quarterback doesn't hurt, either. Redshirt senior Rocco Becht came in from Iowa State, where he started 39 consecutive contests and ranked top three in program history in passing touchdowns (64; second), 300-plus yard passing games (six; second), completions (714; third) and passing yards (9,274; third). Last season, the 6-foot-1, 209-pounder completed 60.5 percent of his passes for 2,584 yards and 16 touchdowns with 9 interceptions, adding 8 scores on the ground.

PSU will be tight end-heavy, similar to the Los Angeles Rams in the NFL, whose offensive coordinator, Nathan Scheelhaase, once worked for Campbell. Offensive coordinator Taylor Mouser is also the Nittany Lions' tight ends coach, and he has two studs in his position group in redshirt junior Andrew Rappleyea, who caught 20 passes for 180 yards and 3 touchdowns last season, and senior Iowa State transfer Benjamin Brahmer, who made 37 receptions for 446 yards and 6 scores in 2025.

There's inexperience on the offensive line, and running backs Kaytron Allen and Nicholas Singleton are off to the NFL, but running the football behind heavy formations will be a staple.

Campbell poached defensive coordinator D'Anton Lynn from USC, a big hire. The Trojans weren't elite on his side of the ball the past two seasons, but it was a big step up from what they had been under head coach Lincoln Riley, ending up 49th nationally in total defense in 2025.

Redshirt junior linebacker Tony Rojas will be back on defense after suffering a torn ACL in September. He was honorable mention All-Big Ten in 2024. The defense also features junior safety Marcus Neal Jr., an Iowa State transfer who compiled 77 tackles, including 11 for loss, with 3 pass breakups, 2 interceptions and a forced fumble in 2025. He will lead a secondary that's expected to be very strong.

The big question for the defense is how well the Nittany Lions will be able to get after the passer. They've had great edge rusher talent over the years, but lost both starters in Dani Dennis-Sutton (fourth round) and Zuriah Fisher (transfer to USC) this offseason. ❑

2026 SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	2025 Result
Sept. 5	MARSHALL	—
Sept. 12	at Temple	—
Sept. 19	BUFFALO	—
Sept. 26	WISCONSIN	—
Oct. 2	at Northwestern	L, 22-21
Oct. 10	USC	—
Oct. 17	***at Michigan***	**—**
Oct. 31	PURDUE	—
Nov. 7	at Washington	—
Nov. 14	MINNESOTA	—
Nov. 21	RUTGERS	W, 40-36
Nov. 28	at Maryland	—

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

- **HC Matt Campbell was a great hire**
- **Easy schedule**
- **Run game, tight ends, secondary**

Campbell doesn't have the best roster he'll possess in State College, but there's enough talent and a favorable schedule that could result in a CFP bid.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

- **Youth and inexperience on OL**
- **Pass-rush question marks**
- **Team chemistry may take time**

There are a lot of new elements at Penn State, leaving big unknowns as to how the team will mesh together and how long it will take.

QUICK FACTS

All-Time Series: Michigan leads 17-10
First Meeting: U-M 21, PSU 13 (Oct. 16, 1993 in State College, Pa.)
Last Meeting: U-M 24, PSU 15 (Nov. 11, 2023 in State College, Pa.)
Head Coach: Matt Campbell, 0-0 at PSU (1st year), 107-70 overall (16th full year)
2025 In Review: 7-6 overall, 3-6 Big Ten
Final 2025 Ranking: Unranked
Returning Starters: 5 (2 offense, 2 defense, 1 specialist)
Last Bowl Appearance: 2025 (Pinstripe Bowl vs. Clemson, W 22-10)

RETURNING LEADERS

Passing: None
Rushing: Quinton Martin Jr. (103 yards)
Receiving: Andrew Rappleyea (180 yards, 3 TD)
Tackles: Audavion Collins (47)
Sacks: Tony Rojas (2)
Interceptions: Jahmir Joseph (1)

Curt Cignetti Is Working His Magic Again At Indiana

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

Indiana did what nobody thought it could, making the College Football Playoff in 2024, its first season under Curt Cignetti. Then in 2025, the Hoosiers did the unthinkable, winning the program's first-ever national championship. Google it — that happened.

Indiana entered the 2025 season as the losingest team in college football history. However, in the middle of the fall, that shameful title fell on Northwestern when the Hoosiers kept winning … and never lost. Indiana became the first team in the modern era to finish 16-0 and the first team to do it since the 1894 Yale Bulldogs.

The scary thing for opponents is that Cignetti is just getting started, and the Hoosiers reloaded by finishing No. 1 in On3's team transfer portal rankings this offseason. That started with landing a third straight starting quarterback out of the portal in redshirt senior TCU transfer Josh Hoover. It worked the last two years with Kurtis Rourke from Ohio and Fernando Mendoza from California, who won the Heisman Trophy and was the No. 1 overall NFL Draft pick of the Las Vegas Raiders.

Hoover is much less mobile than Mendoza, so some changes will come to the offense, but he's efficient and has a ton of experience with 31 career starts. In 2025, the 6-foot-2, 200-pound Heath, Texas, native completed 65.9 percent of his passes for 3,472 yards and 29 touchdowns with 13 interceptions, going 8-4 in the regular season.

Junior linebacker Rolijah Hardy has appeared in 29 games with 20 starts during his career.
PHOTO BY SPENCER MEYER/INDIANA ATHLETICS

Indiana's offense must replace two 1,000-yard rushers in Roman Hemby (1,176) and Kaelon Black (1,057), plus the team's top two wideouts in Omar Cooper Jr. (937 yards, 13 TD) and Elijah Sarratt (830 yards, 15 TD). But they'll once again go with a running back by committee, and they plucked junior wideout Nick Marsh from Michigan State. An honorable mention All-Big Ten selection, Marsh hauled in 59 catches for 662 yards and 6 touchdowns for the Spartans in 2025. Junior receiver Charlie Becker, a 6-foot-4, 207-pounder, was one of the Hoosiers' most underrated pieces last season, with 34 catches for 679 yards and 4 touchdowns.

Michigan transfer Tyler Morris will also contribute, potentially as a starter. He missed the entire 2025 campaign with injury but is back healthy now. The 5-foot-11, 186-pounder has been a part of two national title teams and contributed a big 38-yard touchdown in the Wolverines' Rose Bowl victory over Alabama Jan. 1, 2024.

First-team all-conference left tackle Carter Smith headlines an offensive line that returns two other starters. The Hoosiers put up 41.6 points per game last season, ranking third nationally, and are expected to be potent again.

The offense may take a slight step back, but the defense could be even better — hard to imagine after finishing second in the country by holding opponents to 11.7 points per game. Defensive coordinator Bryant Haines, the 40-year-old Broyles Award winner as the nation's top assistant coach, is being paid the big bucks, up to $3 million in 2026, to elevate his group even further. Cignetti believes it's possible.

"We were pretty solid Year 1, and last year we were obviously good," Cignetti said this spring. "We just seem to be farther along right now."

Five starters remain from that group — both starting defensive tackles in redshirt senior Tyrique Tucker (12 TFL, 6 sacks) and junior Mario Landino (6 TFL, 5 sacks), junior linebacker Rolijah Hardy (team-high 102 tackles, 15 TFL, 8 sacks), redshirt senior cornerback Jamari Sharpe (6 TFL, 1 interception, 6 pass breakups) and senior safety Amare Ferrell (4 interceptions, 6 pass breakups). Sharpe made the championship-sealing pick against Miami in the final game, and the Hoosiers will need more of that playmaking after losing D'Angelo Ponds, a second-round pick to the New York Jets, at cornerback. ❑

QUICK FACTS

All-Time Series: Michigan leads 62-11
First Meeting: U-M 12, IU 0 (Nov. 3, 1900, in Ann Arbor)
Last Meeting: IU 20, U-M 15 (Nov. 9, 2024 in Bloomington, Ind.)
Head Coach: Curt Cignetti, 27-2 at IU (third year), 60-15 overall (7th year in Division I)
2025 In Review: 16-0, 9-0 Big Ten
Final 2025 Ranking: No. 1 AP, No. 1 coaches
Returning Starters: 9 (3 offense, 5 defense, 1 specialist)
Last Bowl Appearance: 2025 (Rose Bowl vs. Alabama, W 38-3; Peach Bowl vs. Oregon, W 56-22)

RETURNING LEADERS

Passing: Grant Wilson (5 yards)
Rushing: Khobie Martin (506 yards, 6 TD)
Receiving: Charlie Becker (679 yards, 4 TD)
Tackles: Rolijah Hardy (102)
Sacks: Rolijah Hardy (8)
Interceptions: Amare Ferrell (4)

2026 SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	2025 Result
Sept. 5	NORTH TEXAS	—
Sept. 12	HOWARD	—
Sept. 19	WESTERN KENTUCKY	—
Sept. 25	NORTHWESTERN	—
Oct. 3	at Rutgers	—
Oct. 10	at Nebraska	—
Oct. 17	OHIO STATE	W, 13-10
Oct. 24	***at Michigan***	**—**
Oct. 31	MINNESOTA	—
Nov. 14	USC	—
Nov. 21	at Washington	—
Nov. 28	PURDUE	W, 56-3

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

- **More Curt Cignetti magic**
- **Another great transfer QB**
- **Defense has a lot of talent**

Cignetti shut all doubters up last season if he didn't in his first year at Indiana. There's no reason to believe this team can't contend.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

- **Losing QB Fernando Mendoza**
- **Need players to step up at RB, TE**
- **Hard to repeat**

Indiana lost eight NFL Draft picks, and it'll be tough to fully replicate what was accomplished last year.

Rutgers Is Attempting To Bounce Back From A Rough Season On Defense

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

Rutgers broke through by making two straight bowl games in 2023-24, before taking a step back in 2025. Head coach Greg Schiano has the program on much more solid footing than he found it in 2020. Prior to Schiano taking over, the Scarlet Knights went two consecutive seasons without a Big Ten win.

Back then, Schiano's objective was to fix *everything*. This offseason, it was to mend the defense, which was historically horrible in 2025.

Co-coordinators Robb Smith and Zach Sparber were let go, after their unit — usually the strength of Schiano's team — was as bad as it's been in this era, finishing near the bottom of the FBS in scoring defense (117th) and total defense (127th).

Travis Johansen, formerly South Dakota's head coach (2025) and defensive coordinator (2019-24), is the replacement, fresh off leading the Jackrabbits to the quarterfinals of the FCS playoffs.

Speedy cornerback Mikey Munn, who clocked a 10.53-second 100-meter dash in high school, helped make Johansen's defense elite last season, and he followed him to Piscataway. The second-team FCS All-American posted 59 tackles and 5 interceptions a year ago. Still, there are questions as to how big of a jump the defense can make one year into a full reset.

Offense had largely been the issue in Schiano's second stint at Rutgers from 2020 on, but it finished 44th in the country with 407.1 yards per game in 2025, with a 3,000-yard passer (Athan Kaliakmanis), 1,000-yard rusher (Antwan Raymond) and 1,000-yard receiver (KJ Duff) for the second time in program history and first since 2007.

Kaliakmanis is gone, a seventh-round pick to the Washington Commanders — the Scarlet Knights' first quarterback to be drafted since Mike Teel in 2009 — but juniors Raymond and Duff are back, providing some firepower for the new starting signal-caller to work with.

Raymond racked up 1,241 yards and 13 touchdowns, while Duff hauled in 60 catches for 1,084 yards and 7 scores, both earning second-team All-Big Ten honors by the coaches and media.

Junior wide receiver KJ Duff was on the Biletnikoff Award watch list in 2025 and finished the season as an honorable mention All-American seclestion by Phil Steele.

PHOTO BY DAKOTA MOYER/RUTGERS ATHLETICS

There's a battle ongoing between senior Dylan Lonergan and junior AJ Surace — and it was too close to call coming out of spring practices. An Alabama (2023-24) and Boston College (2025) transfer, Lonergan started nine games at his previous stop, completing 66.9 percent of his passes for 2,025 yards and 12 touchdowns before being benched. He went 2-7 as the starter on a team that had a rough go. Surace, meanwhile, appeared in three contests as the backup last fall, with most of his playing time coming against Norfolk State, when he tossed 2 touchdowns.

The winner of the competition will look to keep Rutgers trending in the right direction through the air. It finished tied for 25th in the country with 266.1 passing yards per game.

The offensive line has some strong parts, especially on the right side, where there are two returning starters. Kobe Asamoah allowed only 11 pressures with 1 sack last season, while sixth-year senior Tyler Needham is moving back from left to right tackle.

Senior kicker Jai Patel is back after making 13 of his 18 field goal attempts with a 51-yard long, scoring honorable mention All-Big Ten recognition. He's 43-of-55 for his career, including 13-of-19 from 40-plus yards.

Becoming bowl eligible for the third time in four years is more than a reasonable possibility for Schiano and Co. The Scarlet Knights avoid Ohio State and Oregon, and don't have a West Coast road trip. But anything beyond seven wins would be a shock — Rutgers has lost 42 straight games against ranked opponents and hasn't beaten a top-25 team since 2009. ❑

2026 SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	2025 Result
Sept. 3	UMASS	—
Sept. 11	at Boston College	—
Sept. 19	USC	—
Sept. 26	HOWARD	—
Oct. 3	INDIANA	—
Oct. 17	at Maryland	W, 35-20
Oct. 24	at Northwestern	—
Oct. 31	**MICHIGAN**	**—**
Nov. 7	at Wisconsin	—
Nov. 14	NEBRASKA	—
Nov. 21	at Penn State	L, 40-36
Nov. 28	MICHIGAN STATE	—

QUICK FACTS

All-Time Series: Michigan leads 9-1

First Meeting: Rutgers 26, U-M 24 (Oct. 4, 2013, in New Brunswick, N.J.)

Last Meeting: U-M 31, Rutgers 7 (Sept. 23, 2023, in Ann Arbor)

Head Coach: Greg Schiano, 31-41 in second tenure at Rutgers (seventh year), 99-108 overall (18th year)

2025 In Review: 5-7 overall, 2-7 Big Ten

Final 2025 Ranking: Unranked

Returning Starters: 9 (4 offense, 3 defense, 2 specialists)

Last Bowl Appearance: 2024 (Rate Bowl vs. Kansas State, L 44-41)

RETURNING LEADERS

Passing: AJ Surace (58 yards, 2 TD)

Rushing: Antwan Raymond (1,241 yards, 13 TD)

Receiving: KJ Duff (1,084 yards, 7 TD)

Tackles: Kaj Sanders (65)

Sacks: None

Interceptions: Farell Gnago (1)

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

- **Offense is on the rise**
- **Firepower at skill positions**
- **Changes on defense**

Coordinator Kirk Ciarrocca has as much to work with at the skill positions as he has had since arriving in 2023.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

- **Quarterback questions**
- **Defense was disastrous in 2025**
- **Are the QBs good enough?**

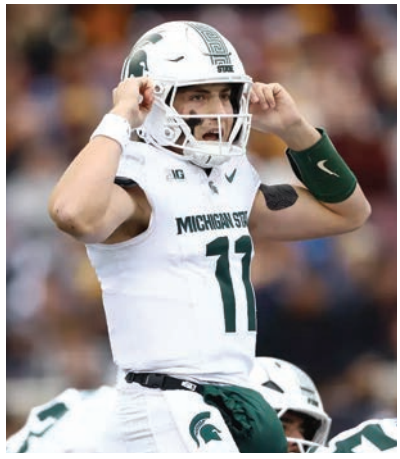
A lot needs to come together for Rutgers. Athan Kaliakmanis provided the program's best quarterback play in some time, and they still missed a bowl game.

Pat Fitzgerald Starts A Slow Build At Michigan State

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

Michigan State is back to square one, with its third new head coach in the last four seasons. Mel Tucker was fired in the middle of the 2023 season, and Jonathan Smith flamed out with only nine wins, including five in the Big Ten, from 2024-25. Now, it's Pat Fitzgerald's turn to try to get the Spartans back to a bowl game for the first time since 2021 — or at least back to their historically typical spot near the middle of the conference.

Like Kyle Whittingham at Utah, Fitzgerald had only been the head coach at one institution prior to taking a new gig. Fitzgerald went 110-101 at Northwestern, where he was an All-American at linebacker, before being fired amid a scandal before the 2023 season. Fitzgerald went under .500 in six of 17 seasons but also had three double-digit win campaigns, 10 bowl appearances and two Big Ten West Division titles. He is the program's winningest coach by 61 victories.



Redshirt sophomore quarterback Alessio Milivojevic passed for 292 yards and 4 touchdowns in a 38-28 season-ending victory over Maryland.

PHOTO BY MICHIGAN STATE ATHLETICS

Since Fitzgerald was out of the game for three seasons prior to taking over in East Lansing, it's fair to question how he'll adjust to the ever-changing landscape of the sport, though he was studying it closely during his hiatus.

Turning around MSU's fortunes won't happen overnight. The Spartans underwent a lot of change this offseason, with 28 transfer additions and 37 portal defections. Nick Sheridan, a former Michigan quarterback, has joined as offensive coordinator, while Fitzgerald retained Joe Rossi as the defensive play caller. Poaching special teams coordinator and assistant head coach LeVar Woods from Iowa was a coup.

"I like where we're at. We have a lot of depth that's going to have to compete, improve and get better as we move forward," Fitzgerald said after the spring.

The program stuck with redshirt sophomore quarterback Alessio Milivojevic as the starter for 2026, after he opened the final four games of the year in taking over for Aidan Chiles, who transferred to Northwestern. The 6-foot-3, 223-pound Naperville, Ill., native connected on 64.2 percent of his passes for 1,267 yards and 10 touchdowns with 3 interceptions, flashing his effectiveness as a thrower.

Former Michigan wideout Fredrick Moore is among the pass-catchers Milivojevic has to work with, but redshirt senior Chrishon McCray (24 catches, 330 yards, 3 TD in 2025) is the most proven option since All-Big Ten honorable mention selection Nick Marsh transferred to Indiana.

The Spartans need more from their offensive line this season, which is bolstered by center Trent Fraley (29 starts at North Dakota State) and left tackle Ben Murawski (19 starts at UConn). Fraley was the Rimington Award winner at the FCS level in 2025, handed out to the nation's best center.

The Spartan run game was poor last season (122.8 yards per game; 110th in the country) but is expected to improve with redshirt senior Cam Edwards transferring in from UConn, where he rushed for 1,240 yards and 15 scores in 2025.

Animated on the sideline, Rossi is heading into his second season with the Spartans. His defense ranked 104th nationally by allowing 29.9 points per contest a year ago and badly needs playmakers to emerge. The Spartans averaged only 1.8 sacks per game (tied for 88th in the FBS) and forced only 9 turnovers (tied for 123rd). The team's leaders in sacks had only 2.5, with no disruptive player separating himself from the pack.

Rossi's group returns senior leading tackler Jordan Hall at linebacker (92 stops), and redshirt senior safety Nikai Martinez is back healthy after missing most of last season with injury. Martinez leads an experienced secondary that saw sixth-year senior Charles Brantley, who spent his first four seasons in East Lansing, transfer back after one year at Miami (Fla.). Martinez and Brantley each have 5 career interceptions and could change the game for a defense that had a rough 2025. ❑

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

- **HC Pat Fitzgerald is a proven winner in the Big Ten**
- **QB Alessio Milivojevic is back**
- **DC Joe Rossi's return provides continuity**

Fitzgerald is attempting to change the culture, and he has proof he can win.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

- **Offensive line has to be much better**
- **Five road games, including at Notre Dame**
- **Roster lacks difference-makers**

The MSU roster has been heavily decimated since it last made a bowl game in 2021, and Fitzgerald won't flip the fortunes easily.

2026 SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	2025 Result
Sept. 4	TOLEDO	—
Sept. 12	EASTERN MICHIGAN	—
Sept. 19	at Notre Dame	—
Sept. 26	NEBRASKA	L, 38-27
Oct. 3	at Wisconsin	—
Oct. 10	ILLINOIS	—
Oct. 17	NORTHWESTERN	—
Oct. 24	at UCLA	L, 38-13
Nov. 7	***at Michigan***	***L, 31-20***
Nov. 14	WASHINGTON	—
Nov. 20	OREGON	—
Nov. 28	at Rutgers	—

QUICK FACTS

All-Time Series: Michigan leads 75-38-5
First Meeting: U-M 39, MSU 0 (Oct. 12, 1898, in Ann Arbor)
Last Meeting: U-M 31, MSU 20 (Oct. 25, 2025, in East Lansing, Mich.)
Head Coach: Pat Fitzgerald, 0-0 at MSU (first year), 110-101 overall (18th year)
2025 In Review: 4-8, 1-8 Big Ten
Final 2025 Ranking: Unranked
Returning Starters: 6 (3 offense, 3 defense, 0 special teams)
Last Bowl Appearance: 2021 (Peach Bowl vs. Pittsburgh, W 31-21)

RETURNING LEADERS

Passing: Alessio Milivojevic (1,267 yards, 10 TD)
Rushing: Brandon Tullis (301 yards, 4 TD)
Receiving: Chrishon McCray (330 yards, 3 TD)
Tackles: Jordan Hall (88)
Sacks: Jordan Hall (2.5)
Interceptions: Aveon Grose, Jordan Hall (1)

Oregon Is Primed To Get Over The CFP Hump

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

Winning 13 games, including two in the College Football Playoff, means Oregon cleared a lot of hurdles in 2025, but there was one it couldn't — beating Indiana. Both of the Ducks' losses came to the Hoosiers, 30-20 in Eugene and 56-22 in the College Football Playoff semifinal at the Peach Bowl. Indiana was that dominant last season, finishing 16-0 as national champion, and Oregon just happened to be standing in its way like it was for Ohio State in 2024. But this season, Oregon has the goods to make another run and perhaps win a title.

Oregon is entering Year 5 under head coach Dan Lanning, who's won at a high level right out of the gate. He's finished top six in the AP poll each of the last three seasons and has only eight losses to his name, after coming over from his post as Georgia's defensive coordinator.

This offseason brought challenges to Lanning, who had to replace both of his coordinators, each of whom earned head-coaching opportunities elsewhere — OC Will Stein at Kentucky and DC Tosh Lupoi at California. The 40-year-old decided to promote from within, tapping Drew Mehringer on offense and Chris Hampton on defense.

Both new coordinators are in great positions to succeed because of what's on the roster. Oregon has the 11th-most returning production in college football, per ESPN, with redshirt junior quarterback Dante Moore being the most notable piece. The Detroit native could've been a first-round pick in the NFL this spring but decided to be a starter for a third year (2023 at UCLA, 2025 at Oregon), after earning third-team All-Big Ten honors last season. He completed 71.8 percent of his passes for 3,565 yards and 30 touchdowns with 10 interceptions.

One of the seven Ducks drafted into the NFL was tight end Kenyon Sadiq in the first round (No. 16, New York Jets), but that position figures to be a strength again. ESPN analyst Matt Miller placed redshirt junior Jamari Johnson as the No. 1 tight end in the 2027 NFL Draft, and he was very productive a year ago with 32 catches for 510 yards and 3 scores.

Two starting wide receivers (redshirt sophomore Jeremiah McClellan and sophomore Dakorien Moore) are back, as are two of the team's top three rushers. The running back duo of sophomores Jordon Davison and Dierre Hill Jr. will be one of the nation's best. Davis rushed for 667 yards and a team-high 15 touchdowns, while Hill ranked second nationally with 8.8 yards per carry, totaling 656 yards and 5 scores.

Sophomore running back Dierre Hill Jr. led the team with 12 rushes of 15-plus yards last season.
PHOTO COURTESY OREGON ATHLETICS

The offensive line returns two starters, including senior Iapani Laloulu, a first-team All-American last year (Football Writers Association of America). The Ducks turned to the transfer portal to reload up front, and that gamble is one of the few question marks on the team.

The defense is veteran-laden, especially at the line of scrimmage. All four defensive line starters spurned the NFL Draft and returned to school, making up one of the nastiest trench crews in the country. Senior edge rusher Teitum Tuoiti led the team with 16 TFL and 9.5 sacks, and he is known for his effort and tenacity, while senior defensive tackle A'Mauri Washington joined him on the All-Big Ten third team.

The other Oregon first-round selection was safety Dillon Thieneman, who started his career at Purdue, but Lanning and Co. found the perfect replacement, Minnesota transfer Koi Perich, a superb athlete who's seen time on offense, defense and special teams, was a freshman All-American in 2024 and has picked off 6 career passes.

Perich is joined in the secondary by sophomore cornerback Brandon Finney Jr., who was lockdown as a freshman and earned second-team All-Big Ten recognition in 2025. ❑

QUICK FACTS

All-Time Series: Tied 3-3
First Meeting: U-M 14, Oregon 0 (Oct. 2, 1948 in Ann Arbor)
Last Meeting: Oregon 38, U-M 17 (Nov. 2, 2024, in Ann Arbor)
Head Coach: Dan Lanning, 48-8 at Oregon (fifth year) and overall
2025 In Review: 13-2 overall, 8-1 Big Ten
Final 2025 Ranking: No. 4 AP, No. 4 coaches
Returning Starters: 13 (5 offense, 8 defense, 0 specialists)
Last Bowl Appearance: 2025 (Orange Bowl vs. Texas Tech, W 23-0; Peach Bowl vs. Indiana, L 56-22)

RETURNING LEADERS

Passing: Dante Moore (3,565 yards, 30 TD)
Rushing: Jordan Davison (667 yards, 15 TD)
Receiving: Jeremiah McClellan (557 yards, 3 TD)
Tackles: Aaron Flowers (70)
Sacks: Tritium Tuioti (9.5)
Interceptions: Brandon Finney Jr. (3)

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

- **Third-year starter at QB**
- **Offensive weapons**
- **Experienced defense**

Lanning has been one of the masters at plugging roster holes through the portal, but the headline this season is all that he returns.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

- **Offensive line coming together**
- **Can QB Dante Moore take the next step**
- **Stacking up in the CFP**

Oregon was blown out in each of its last two CFP losses, and now it's time for the Ducks to flip their fortunes.

2026 SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	2025 Result
Sept. 5	BOISE STATE	—
Sept. 12	at Oklahoma State	W, 69-3
Sept. 18	PORTLAND STATE	—
Sept. 26	at USC	W, 42-27
Oct. 10	UCLA	—
Oct. 17	NEBRASKA	—
Oct. 24	at Illinois	—
Oct. 31	NORTHWESTERN	W, 34-14
Nov. 7	at Ohio State	—
Nov. 14	***MICHIGAN***	**—**
Nov. 20	at Michigan State	—
Nov. 28	WASHINGTON	W, 26-14

UCLA Makes An 'A' Hire With Bob Chesney

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

The UCLA administration and fan base had enough of the DeShaun Foster era, which ended after just 15 games, three into last season. Tim Skipper took over as interim head coach for the final nine contests, and the Bruins went 3-6, beating then-No. 7 Penn State as part of a three-game winning streak in October. It was much better than what they'd seen from the program since Chip Kelly was in charge.

Redshirt sophomore quarterback Nico Iamaleava ranked second in the Big Ten among non-running backs with 664 rushing yards (excluding sacks) in 2025.

PHOTO BY ROSS TURTELTAUB

There's an even higher level of legitimacy with 48-year-old Bob Chesney being the latest James Madison coach to jump to the Big Ten, joining Indiana national champion Curt Cignetti. Chesney went 21-6 in two seasons as Cignetti's successor. He's led college football programs to the playoffs at three different levels — at Division II with Assumption in 2015, '16 and '17, Division I FCS at Holy Cross in 2019, '20, '21 and '22, and Division I FBS at James Madison in 2025.

The Athletic graded the Chesney hire as an "A," citing his ability to win at every level he's coached.

The roster has been upgraded, with 42 transfers, including 10 from James Madison. On3's transfer portal rankings, which weigh both additions and departures, have the Bruins at No. 11 in the country this offseason.

No Big Ten schedule is easy, but UCLA avoids Ohio State, Indiana and Penn State this season, and two of its three road games away from the West Coast are to Minnesota and Maryland. It certainly could be worse.

Redshirt junior quarterback Nico Iamaleava is entering his third season as a Power Four starter. This is his second year at UCLA, where he completed 64.4 percent of his passes for 1,928 yards and 13 touchdowns with 7 interceptions and led the team with 505 rushing yards and 4 scores in 2025. There's more to his game that can be unlocked, evidenced by his much more efficient 2024 campaign at Tennessee, when he tossed 19 touchdowns and racked up 2,616 passing yards. Offensive coordinator Dean Kennedy, who's coached with Chesney at Holy Cross and James Madison, runs a system that's believed to fit Iamaleava's skill set, featuring a lot of quarterback runs.

The offensive line is a big question mark. UCLA wouldn't have brought in 10 transfers at the position group if it wasn't. Running the football is a potential strength of the offense, with a lot of options at running back. The most notable is redshirt senior JMU transfer Wayne Knight, who was a second-team All-America selection by the Associated Press after rushing for 1,373 yards (6.6 per carry) and 9 touchdowns with 397 receiving yards in 2025.

Sophomore wide receiver Brian Rowe Jr., a 6-foot, 170-pound South Carolina transfer, looks like he'll be the top target. He's primed for a breakout following a big spring. Rowe hauled in 19 catches for 149 yards and a touchdown with the Gamecocks last season.

James Madison finished 13th nationally in scoring defense last season, and that side of the ball is Chesney's calling card, working closely with coordinator Colin Hitschler, who also followed him from JMU.

Defensive tackle is perhaps the biggest concern on the team, but the defensive line will have some talent, led by 6-foot-4, 270-pound edge rusher Sahir West. The redshirt sophomore was named the Sun Belt Freshman of the Year in 2025, posting 7 sacks for JMU.

The defensive backfield also has some juice. Utah transfer Tao Johnson joined the fold, following a 51-tackle, 2-interception campaign under new Michigan coach Kyle Whittingham in 2025. Cornerback Rodrick Pleasant, meanwhile, is working back from an injury; he was tabbed as All-Big Ten honorable mention last season, recording 36 tackles and 7 pass breakups.

There's a lot of betting on Chesney and players from a lower level panning out at UCLA, which has underperformed for the majority of this century, with 12 sub-.500 campaigns in that timeframe. But there's much more excitement about the foundation that is being built than there was with Foster, who had no head-coaching experience, at the helm. ❑

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

- **HC Bob Chesney's track record**
- **QB Nico Iamaleava's experience**
- **Reasonable schedule**

UCLA has new life with a fresh coaching staff and roster, headed by a leader in Chesney who's won everywhere he's coached.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

- **Unproven at defensive tackle**
- **O-line has been poor in recent years**
- **Chesney is just getting started**

It's fair to question just how good UCLA can be right away, in large part because there's a lot to build on the lines of scrimmage.

2026 SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	2025 Result
Sept. 5	at California	—
Sept. 12	SAN DIEGO STATE	—
Sept. 19	PURDUE	—
Sept. 26	at Maryland	W, 20-17
Oct. 10	at Oregon	—
Oct. 17	WISCONSIN	—
Oct. 24	MICHIGAN STATE	W, 38-13
Oct. 31	NEVADA	—
Nov. 7	at Minnesota	—
Nov. 14	ILLINOIS	—
Nov. 21	***at Michigan***	**—**
Nov. 28	USC	L, 29-10

QUICK FACTS

All-Time Series: Michigan leads 8-3

First Meeting: U-M 42, UCLA 13 (Sept. 29, 1956, in Ann Arbor)

Last Meeting: UCLA 23, U-M 20 (Sept. 16, 2000, in Pasadena, Calif.)

Head Coach: Bob Chesney, 0-0 at UCLA (first year), 65-27 overall (ninth year)

2025 In Review: 3-9 overall, 3-6 Big Ten

Final 2025 Ranking: Unranked

Returning Starters: 7 (3 offense, 3 defense, 1 specialist)

Last Bowl Appearance: 2023 (Los Angeles Bowl vs. Boise State, W 35-22)

RETURNING LEADERS

Passing: Nico Iamaleava (1,928 yards, 13 TD)

Rushing: Nico Iamaleava (505 yards, 4 TD)

Receiving: Mikey Matthews (348 yards, 2 TD)

Tackles: Cole Martin (65)

Sacks: Jalen Woods (1.5)

Interceptions: Scooter Jackson (2)

Ohio State Has Offensive Firepower But Must Reload On Defense

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

Ohio State followed up its national championship by going 12-0 in the 2025 regular season, before faltering down the stretch. The Buckeyes lost to Indiana in the Big Ten championship game (13-10) and then fell to Miami in the CFP quarterfinals (24-14), manhandled by both at the line of scrimmage.

Head coach Ryan Day has lost only 12 games in seven-plus seasons, four of them to Michigan, and has always had his team in contention for a national title late in the season. This year looks like it'll be more of the same.

Junior wide receiver Jeremiah Smith is one of only two Buckeyes in history to record multiple 1,000-yard receiving seasons, joining Marvin Harrison Jr. on that short list.

PHOTO COURTESY OHIO STATE ATHLETICS

Nobody knew how longtime NFL coach Matt Patricia would do as the defensive coordinator last year, but he answered all those questions and then some. He had elite talent and maximized it, with the Buckeyes finishing No. 1 in the FBS in both scoring and total defense. Day went back to the NFL well with his offensive coordinator hire this offseason, tapping Arthur Smith as the replacement for offensive coordinator Brian Hartline, who's now the head coach at South Florida. Smith hasn't coached in college since 2010, when he was a defensive intern at Ole Miss, but the reacclimation process is easier with great players all over the field.

Redshirt sophomore quarterback Julian Sayin, a 6-foot-1, 208-pound Carlsbad, Calif., native, was tremendous in his first season as a starter and traveled to New York as a Heisman Trophy finalist. He completed 77 percent of his throws for 3,610 yards and 32 touchdowns with 8 interceptions.

Carnell Tate was the No. 4 overall pick in the NFL Draft, but wide receiver is hardly a concern even with Hartline, who was also the position coach, out of the picture. Junior Jeremiah Smith is a Heisman candidate himself, after hauling in 87 catches for 1,243 yards and 12 touchdowns. His 2,558 receiving yards and 27 touchdown receptions are the most by any Big Ten receiver in their first two years in college.

Five-star freshman Chris Henry Jr., the No. 1 wideout in the 2026 class, will step into the lineup alongside Smith and senior Brandon Innis, who reeled in 36 grabs for 271 yards and 3 scores last fall.

Sayin, Smith and sophomore running back Bo Jackson make up one of the most prolific skill position trios in the country. Jackson, a 6-foot, 217-pound Cleveland product, checked in No. 5 in the Big Ten with 1,090 rushing yards last season.

The offensive line wasn't good enough against the best teams, with OSU combining for only 103 rushing yards in losses to Indiana (53) and Miami (45), but four starters are back, including a pair of second-team All-Big Ten performers on the left side in redshirt junior Austin Siereveld at tackle and senior Luke Montgomery at guard.

OSU had three defenders selected in the first 11 picks of the NFL Draft — linebackers Arvell Reese (No. 5, New York Giants) and Sonny Styles (No. 7, Washington Commanders) and safety Caleb Downs (No. 11, Dallas Cowboys), so there are questions as to how Patricia's group will reload.

Only one starter is back on the defensive line — redshirt senior end Kenyatta Jackson Jr. — but OSU went to the transfer portal for reinforcements. How those pan out could determine how far the Buckeyes go in 2026, but Jackson is primed for a big season. He exploded for 11 TFL and 6.5 sacks a year ago.

Junior safety Jaylen McClain may not be as good as Downs, but he's the stud on the back end of the defense. He finished last season with 53 tackles and 3 pass breakups, collecting third-team All-Big Ten recognition. It's only natural he takes a big step forward with more responsibility. ❑

2026 SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	2025 Result
Sept. 5	BALL STATE	—
Sept. 12	at Texas	W, 14-7
Sept. 19	KENT STATE	—
Sept. 26	ILLINOIS	W, 34-16
Oct. 3	at Iowa	—
Oct. 10	MARYLAND	—
Oct. 17	at Indiana	L, 13-10
Oct. 31	at USC	—
Nov. 7	OREGON	—
Nov. 14	NORTHWESTERN	—
Nov. 21	at Nebraska	—
Nov. 28	***MICHIGAN***	***W, 27-9***

QUICK FACTS

All-Time Series: Michigan leads 62-52-6 (2010 OSU win vacated)

First Meeting: U-M 34, OSU 0 (Oct. 16, 1897, in Ann Arbor)

Last Meeting: OSU 27, U-M 9 (Nov. 29, 2025, in Ann Arbor)

Head Coach: Ryan Day, 82-12 at Ohio State (eighth full year) and overall

2025 In Review: 12-2 overall, 9-0 Big Ten

Final 2025 Ranking: No. 5 AP, No. 6 coaches

Returning Starters: 11 (7 offense, 3 defense, 1 specialist)

Last Bowl Appearance: 2025 (CFP quarterfinal vs. Miami, L 24-14)

RETURNING LEADERS

Passing: Julian Sayin (3,610 yards, 32 TD)

Rushing: Bo Jackson (1,090 yards, 6 TD)

Receiving: Jeremiah Smith (1,243 yards, 12 TD)

Tackles: Jaylen McClain (53)

Sacks: Kenyatta Jackson Jr. (6.5)

Interceptions: Jermaine Mathews Jr. (2)

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

- **Ohio State hardly loses**
- **Returning production on offense**
- **Star power**

Ohio State typically has one of the most talented rosters in the country, and this year's is no different, especially on offense.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

- **Recreating defensive magic**
- **New offensive coordinator**
- **QB Julian Sayin's next step**

Ohio State was great, but not great enough, last season. There's still more to prove for the Buckeyes to make it back to the final game.

Quarterback Bryce Underwood started every game as a true freshman, accounting for 17 touchdowns (11 passing and 6 rushing).
PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

2025 Young Wolverines Ride The Roller Coaster

Sherrone Moore's Firing Caps A Tumultuous Campaign

BY ANTHONY BROOME

Two years ago, there was not a whole lot to write home about until wins over Ohio State and Alabama capped off the 2024 season and provided some hope that perhaps Sherrone Moore and his U-M program had navigated the choppiest waters it would face on his watch.

It turns out that could not have been further from the truth in 2025.

Michigan seemed to line up for a much better second year under Moore, from a freshman phenom at quarterback in Bryce Underwood to a schedule that was much more forgiving than the 2024 slate. There was optimism that if the Wolverines could handle some difficult road trips to Oklahoma, Nebraska and USC in the first six weeks they would be able to make a run for a College Football Playoff spot. Instead, the Wolverines, who had the youngest roster in the Big Ten at an average age of 20.5 years old, were forced to navigate the natural ups-and-downs that come with a rookie handling the starting quarterback duties, a school-imposed two-game suspension for Moore early in the season and a litany of other issues and inconsistencies. Michigan lost the road games at Oklahoma and USC but found a way to steal one without Moore on the sideline at Nebraska to head into the stretch run with a 4-2 record, and the hope that a young team would hit its stride as the calendar flipped to November.

But even in a five-game win streak heading into the Ohio State game, there were struggles, growing pains and self-inflicted errors both on the field and on the sideline that felt like the process had stagnated.

And on Nov. 29, the Buckeyes brought it all crashing down by dominating Michigan at the Big House, 27-9, ending a four-game win streak for the Wolverines and knocking them out of the CFP picture with a 9-3 regular-season record.

Moore would later be dismissed on Dec. 10 after the discovery of an inappropriate relationship with a U-M staffer, sending the program into complete disarray with Citrus Bowl preparations already underway. Associate head coach Biff Poggi stepped as the team's interim head coach for the final three weeks of the season after previously serving in the role for the Central Michigan and Nebraska games in September. Poggi managed to keep much of the roster and staff intact — aside from offensive coordinator Chip Lindsey, who left for Missouri in December – for bowl prep, culminating in a 41-27 loss to the Texas Longhorns in Orlando to close out a 9-4 (7-2 Big Ten) season.

Poggi then passed the baton to Kyle Whittingham, who held his opening press conference in Florida and got right to work as the next leader of the Michigan football program.

TOP STORYLINES

1. SHERRONE MOORE FIRED FOR CAUSE, KYLE WHITTINGHAM ERA BEGINS

Unfortunately, the storyline this season will be most remembered for how it ended. U-M fired Moore with cause on Dec. 10 after receiving "credible evidence" that he engaged in an inappropriate relationship with a staff member, later revealed to be his assistant, Paige Shiver.

On the same day he was fired, Moore allegedly broke into Shiver's apartment and threatened to harm himself while screaming at her that she had ruined his life. He was arrested and charged with third-degree home invasion, stalking and entering without permission. In March 2026, Moore pleaded no contest to two misdemeanors — malicious use of a telecommunications device and trespass — and was sentenced to 18 months of probation.

The Moore situation and U-M's handling of the saga led to the hiring of the Jenner & Block law firm to investigate his conduct and the athletics department's culture.

Biff Poggi was tabbed interim head coach to lead preparations for the Citrus Bowl against Texas, while the athletics department conducted a national search for Moore's replacement and landed on former Utah head coach Kyle Whittingham, who was hired on Dec. 26 and immediately flew down to Orlando to meet with players and their families at the Citrus Bowl.

2. BRYCE UNDERWOOD STARTS IMMEDIATELY

Michigan made waves on the recruiting trail late in the 2025 cycle by flipping No. 1 overall recruit Bryce Underwood away from LSU, making him the new de facto face of the program after a 2024 season that was fraught with quarterback issues. U-M's massive investment got him to Ann Arbor, and his immense talent level allowed him to take reps as the starting quarterback from the beginning at Michigan.

Underwood, who turned 18 just days before the start of the season, started all 13 games in 2025, throwing for 2,428 yards with 11 touchdowns and 9 interceptions, completing 202-of-335 passes (60.3 percent) and ranking 29th in ESPN QBR on the season (72.6). His freshman year was inconsistent rather than a linear progression. He fought through typical first-year mistakes, a lack of playmakers around him, porous pass protection and an overly cautious approach to his development. Underwood's dual-threat skill set was also teased with 88 carries for 392 yards and 6 touchdowns on the season, including a game with 9 rushes for 114 yards and 2 touchdowns in a nonconference win over Central Michigan.

3. WOLVERINES STRUGGLE MIGHTILY IN BIG GAMES

Despite the 12-team College Football Playoff offering more leeway to absorb a couple losses in the regular season, the Wolverines were woefully underprepared for the best opponents on the schedule. U-M's seven wins in Big Ten play came against the No. 7 (Washington), No. 10 (Nebraska), No. 11 (Northwestern), No. 15 (Wisconsin), No. 16 (Michigan State), No. 17 (Maryland) and No. 18 (Purdue) teams in the final conference standings. An additional win anywhere else would have meant a likely CFP berth.

Instead, U-M lost a critical Week 2 nonconference game at Oklahoma (24-13) and a showdown out west with USC (31-13), and saw its four-game win streak over Ohio State snapped with a 27-9 loss to the Buckeyes at a snowy Michigan Stadium. Those efforts were a continuation of a disturbing trend under Moore, with seven of his eight losses on the sideline coming by double digits, and scoring 17 or fewer points in all of them. Poggi and the Wolverines held a 27-24 lead over Texas late in the Citrus Bowl, but the Longhorns rallied and pulled away for a 41-27 victory.

Moore ended his time as U-M's head coach 3-6 against Top 25 opponents, with the lone wins coming against No. 11 USC, No. 2 Ohio State and No. 11 Alabama, all during the 2024 season.

TOP THREE INDIVIDUALS

1. RBS JUSTICE HAYNES AND JORDAN MARSHALL (TIE)

Haynes and Marshall were tied at the hip as U-M's tailback duo, and it is hard to do anything but loop them together as the most critical players from the 2025 season. They combined for 271 carries for 1,789 yards and 20 touchdowns, taking turns as the lead back throughout the year until Haynes went down with an injury seven games in. They were a non-negotiable strength on an offense that otherwise lacked a ton of playmaking juice and was led by a true freshman at quarterback. They were probably worth a combined three wins on their own throughout the campaign.

2. EDGE DERRICK MOORE

Elected a team captain prior to the season, Moore had a strong year and started 12 games, making 30 tackles and racking up 10 sacks and 10.5 tackles for loss, along with 3 passes defended, 2 forced fumbles and a fumble recovery. He led the team with 41 pressures on the quarterback, using a bull rush to overwhelm offensive linemen. According to Pro Football Focus, he finished last year with a 36 percent win rate in true pass rush situations, ranking 10th among all edge players with at least 100 pass rush reps.

3. WR ANDREW MARSH

Michigan's wide receiver room was lacking in proven production and talent heading into last year, opening the door for someone unexpected to emerge. That wound up being a true freshman in Marsh, who did not receive his first start until four games into the season, but led the group in catches (45), yards (651) and touchdowns (4) and was one of the best wideouts in the Big Ten, regardless of class, by the time the year ended. His emergence gave the Wolverines a semblance of a consistent passing game threat and a reliable weapon for Bryce Underwood to grow alongside.

Transfer running back Justice Haynes rushed for 857 yards and 10 touchdowns in seven games before his season was ended by a leg injury.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Top 3 Performances

1. WR ANDREW MARSH AT NORTHWESTERN

Marsh's freshman season was an announcement that he was already one of the top wide receivers in the Big Ten, and his best performance came in the mid-November showdown at Wrigley Field with 12 catches for 189 yards, including a 21-yard reception on third-and-10 on the winning drive after the Wolverines had squandered a 21-9 lead it had late in the game. Bryce Underwood found his classmate early and often throughout the contest, cementing a connection that has a chance to evolve over the next few seasons in Ann Arbor.

2. RB JORDAN MARSHALL VS. PURDUE

U-M was a 21-point favorite over the hapless Boilermakers on Nov. 1, but found themselves in a dogfight in a game where it struggled to score 21 points on its own. One week after Justice Haynes was lost to injury at MSU, lead back duties were thrust upon Marshall. He delivered in a big way with 25 carries for a career-high 185 yards and all 3 touchdowns scored in the 21-16 victory, including a 54-yard touchdown blast late in the first quarter to give the Wolverines an early 7-0 lead.

3. LB JIMMY ROLDER AT MICHIGAN STATE

One week after a standout performance against Washington (8 tackles, 1.5 tackles for loss, first-career interception), the senior linebacker was a man possessed in the 31-20 rivalry win over the Spartans, delivering 10 tackles, 2 tackles for loss, a sack, a fumble recovery and a pass defended in the win. His production earned him Big Ten Defensive Player of the Week honors on Oct. 27. Rolder was banged up down the stretch, but followed it up later in the year with 12 tackles and 1.5 tackles for loss in a loss to Ohio State.

Senior linebacker Jimmy Rolder came up big in a number of games for the Wolverines, perhaps none bigger than in the win against Michigan State when he delivered 10 tackles, 2 tackles for loss, a sack, a fumble recovery and a pass breakup.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

TOP 3 GAMES

The Wolverines went on the road to East Lansing where they swarmed in-state rival Michigan State, 31-20. It was U-M's fourth straight win in the series.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

1. 30-27 WIN AT NEBRASKA, SEPT. 20

Two weeks removed from a gut-punch of a loss at Oklahoma, U-M had to find a way to rally and keep its College Football Playoff hopes alive at Nebraska with Sherrone Moore serving the second game of a school-imposed two-game suspension over his role in the 2023 sign-stealing/recruiting scandal. Interim head coach Biff Poggi stepped in and led the team to a 63-3 win over Central Michigan on Sept. 13, refocusing a group that had a lot to prove heading into a raucous Nebraska environment. The Cornhuskers were desperately hungry for a signature win under head coach Matt Rhule, and it seemed to be there for the taking against a young and interim-coached U-M squad. The Wolverines jumped out to a 10-0 lead in the first quarter before Nebraska tied the score with 2:01 to go in the half. Running back Justice Haynes answered with a 75-yard run 10 seconds later to take a 17-10 lead. A botched clock situation led to Nebraska converting a Hail Mary attempt as time expired, sending the game to a 17-17 tie heading into the locker room.

Michigan settled in and held a pair of 10-point leads at 27-17 (5:40, third quarter) and 30-20 (3:54, fourth quarter). The Huskers scored a touchdown with 1:34 left to bring the score to 30-27, which is how it finished.

2. 31-20 WIN AT MICHIGAN STATE, OCT. 25

Seasons without a win over the Spartans that can be deemed a success are rare in program history. The same can be said, even more so, on the other side of the rivalry. U-M had gotten its season back on track with a win over Washington the week before the trip to East Lansing. The Wolverines jumped out to a 10-0 lead over the Spartans in the first quarter thanks to a Dominic Zvada field goal and 13-yard run by Bryce Underwood with 3:58 to go in the quarter. The rest of the half was a slog, with the Spartans getting on the board on a 1-yard run from quarterback Aidan Chiles with 8:24 remaining. The scoreboard read 10-7 U-M at the half.

Michigan pulled away at Spartan Stadium in the third quarter on a pair of Justice Haynes touchdown runs from 5 and 14 yards to take a 24-7 lead into the fourth quarter. MSU cut into the deficit with a 1-yard run from Brandon Tullus and failed on a 2-point conversion to put the score at 24-13 with 12:34 on the game clock. Jordan Marshall slammed the door with a 56-yard touchdown run with 2:48 remaining, putting U-M ahead 31-13. MSU scored a garbage-time touchdown with 7 seconds left, covering the spread with some dignity intact.

3. 24-7 WIN VS. WASHINGTON, OCT. 18

A 31-13 loss at USC on Oct. 11 led to a lot of finger-pointing and soul-searching in the week leading up to a showdown with Washington, led by former Jim Harbaugh assistant coach Jedd Fisch, the following week at the Big House. The Huskies' only loss of the season to that point had come to No. 1 Ohio State in September, and they were up for the fight despite a 9 a.m. body-clock kickoff in a "Big Noon Saturday" game on FOX.

Michigan struck initially in a low-scoring first half on a 22-yard screen pass from Bryce Underwood to Andrew Marsh, giving the Wolverines a 7-0 lead with 33 seconds left in the first quarter after the extra point. Washington tied the score with 40 seconds left in the first half on a 1-yard run from Jonah Coleman, sending the game to a 7-7 stalemate heading up the tunnel.

The Huskies got the ball to start the second half and punted twice, while Michigan had a turnover on downs and a punt. The game flipped with 1:26 left in the quarter with linebacker Cole Sullivan's interception, and a Jordan Marshall TD on a 14-yard run 6 seconds later, giving U-M a 14-7 lead with 1:20 left in the third. Three snaps later, Williams was picked off by Jimmy Rolder, and U-M extended its lead to 21-7 after a 9-play, 62-yard drive that stretched into the fourth quarter. After tacking on a field goal with 4:10 to go, U-M walked out with a 24-7 win.

Top 3 Individual Plays

1. UNDERWOOD FINDS MARSH ON GAME-WINNING DRIVE

Bryce Underwood's freshman season was filled with the highs and lows of a first-year starting quarterback who just turned 18 years old days before the season began. Something a signal-caller has to do when called upon is find a way to secure victory in the waning moments. One of his best performances of the year quickly deteriorated with 2 interceptions and a fumble in the fourth quarter versus Northwestern, turning a 21-9 lead into a 22-21 deficit. Underwood found classmate Andrew Marsh for a 21-yard completion on third-and-10 with 1:53 to go, keeping hope alive and setting up a Dominic Zvada 31-yard field goal into the Wrigley Field bleachers as time expired.

2. ROD MOORE'S MILESTONE MOMENT

Moore tore his ACL during spring camp in 2024, setting up a long road to recovery. It took a little longer than expected to return to the field, but he saw game action on Sept. 20 at Nebraska. But the comeback was not official until the next week in a 24-10 win over Wisconsin, when late in the third quarter he gathered his first interception since the win over Ohio State in 2023. The excitement over his return was short-lived after he re-injured himself the following week at USC, keeping him out the rest of the 2025 season. He is expected to return healthy in 2026.

3. HAYNES GOES THE DISTANCE AT NEBRASKA

Justice Haynes dazzled with plenty of long runs during his seven games played in 2025, but his biggest came in the win at Nebraska. Two weeks after hitting the Oklahoma Sooners with a 75-yard touchdown run on the first play from scrimmage in the second half, he victimized the Cornhuskers with a 75-yard blast with 1:51 to go until halftime to give U-M a 17-10 lead one snap after Nebraska had just tied the score with a touchdown drive. He finished the game with 17 carries for 149 yards and the touchdown.

2025 MICHIGAN FOOTBALL CUMULATIVE STATISTICS

RUSHING	G	ATT.	GAIN	LOST	NET	AVG.	TD	LONG	YDS./G
Marshall, Jordan	11	150	938	6	932	6.2	10	65	84.7
Haynes, Justice	7	121	879	22	857	7.1	10	75	122.4
Underwood, Bryce	13	88	523	131	392	4.5	6	37	30.2
Kuzdzal, Bryson	9	76	345	19	326	4.3	4	22	36.2
Parker, Jasper	6	25	93	0	93	3.7	2	11	15.5
O'Meara, Tomas	2	11	84	1	83	7.5	0	37	41.5
Ka'apana, Micah	4	10	40	2	38	3.8	0	11	9.5
Morgan, Semaj	11	5	25	0	25	5.0	0	11	2.3
Marsh, Andrew	13	2	23	10	13	6.5	1	23	1.0
Simpson, Anthony	4	1	10	0	10	10.0	0	10	2.5
McCulley, Donaven	13	2	11	6	5	2.5	0	11	0.4
Davis, Jadyn	3	1	0	6	-6	-6.0	0	0	-2.0
TEAM	13	10	0	36	-36	-3.6	0	0	-2.8
Total	**13**	**502**	**2971**	**239**	**2732**	**5.4**	**33**	**75**	**210.2**
Opponent	**13**	**427**	**1794**	**339**	**1455**	**3.4**	**14**	**60**	**111.9**

PASSING	G	ATT.	COM.	PCT.	INT.	YARDS	TD	LONG	YDS./G
Underwood, Bryce	13	335	202	60.3	9	2428	11	69	186.8
Davis, Jadyn	3	2	0	0.0	1	0	0	0	0.0
McCulley, Donaven	13	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0	0.0
Morgan, Semaj	11	2	0	0.0	0	0	0	0	0.0
Total	**13**	**340**	**202**	**59.4**	**10**	**2428**	**11**	**69**	**186.8**
Opponent	**13**	**426**	**271**	**63.6**	**13**	**2748**	**17**	**52**	**211.4**

RECEIVING	G	REC.	YARDS	AVG.	TD	LONG	YDS./G
Marsh, Andrew	13	45	651	14.5	4	69	50.1
McCulley, Donaven	13	39	588	15.1	3	44	45.2
Klein, Marlin	11	24	248	10.3	1	27	22.5
Morgan, Semaj	11	20	223	11.2	1	32	20.3
Marshall, Zack	13	16	199	12.4	1	37	15.3
Goodwin, Channing	13	12	148	12.3	0	39	11.4
Marshall, Jordan	11	9	92	10.2	0	25	8.4
Hansen, Hogan	4	6	74	12.3	0	26	18.5
Tonielli, Deakon	13	8	72	9.0	0	28	5.5
Bell, Kendrick	13	3	54	18.0	1	30	4.2
Haynes, Justice	7	13	50	3.8	0	16	7.1
Bredeson, Max	11	2	11	5.5	0	7	1.0
Kuzdzal, Bryson	9	4	10	2.5	0	8	1.1
Ka'apana, Micah	4	1	8	8.0	0	8	2.0
Total	**13**	**202**	**2428**	**12.0**	**11**	**69**	**186.8**
Opponent	**13**	**271**	**2748**	**10.1**	**17**	**52**	**211.4**

TOTAL OFFENSE	G	RUSH	PASS	TOTAL	YDS./G
Underwood, Bryce	13	392	2428	2820	216.9
Marshall, Jordan	11	932	0	932	84.7
Haynes, Justice	7	857	0	857	122.4
Kuzdzal, Bryson	9	326	0	326	36.2
Parker, Jasper	6	93	0	93	15.5
O'Meara, Tomas	2	83	0	83	41.5
Ka'apana, Micah	4	38	0	38	9.5
Morgan, Semaj	11	25	0	25	2.3
Marsh, Andrew	13	13	0	13	1.0
Simpson, Anthony	4	10	0	10	2.5
McCulley, Donaven	13	5	0	5	0.4
Davis, Jadyn	3	-6	0	-6	-2.0
TEAM	13	-36	0	-36	-2.8
Total	**13**	**2732**	**2428**	**5160**	**396.9**
Opponent	**13**	**1455**	**2748**	**4203**	**323.3**

ALL-PURPOSE	G	RUSH	REC	PR	KR	IR	TOTAL	YDS./G
Marsh, Andrew	13	13	651	45	378	0	1087	83.6
Marshall, Jordan	11	932	92	0	0	0	1024	93.1
Haynes, Justice	7	857	50	0	0	0	907	129.6
McCulley, Donaven	13	5	588	0	0	0	593	45.6
Underwood, Bryce	13	392	0	0	0	0	392	30.2
Kuzdzal, Bryson	9	326	10	0	0	0	336	37.3
Morgan, Semaj	11	25	223	30	0	0	278	25.3
Klein, Marlin	11	0	248	0	0	0	248	22.5
Marshall, Zack	13	0	199	0	0	0	199	15.3
Goodwin, Channing	13	0	148	0	3	0	151	11.6
Parker, Jasper	6	93	0	0	0	0	93	15.5
O'Meara, Tomas	2	83	0	0	0	0	83	41.5
Hansen, Hogan	4	0	74	0	0	0	74	18.5
Tonielli, Deakon	13	0	72	0	0	0	72	5.5
Bell, Kendrick	13	0	54	0	1	0	55	4.2
Ka'apana, Micah	4	38	8	0	0	0	46	11.5
Taylor, Joe	12	0	0	0	20	0	20	1.7
Curtis, Mason	11	0	0	0	0	14	14	1.3
Berry, Zeke	11	0	0	0	11	0	11	1.0
Bredeson, Max	11	0	11	0	0	0	11	1.0
Marshall, Nate	11	0	0	0	11	0	11	1.0
Simpson, Anthony	4	10	0	0	0	0	10	2.5
Sullivan, Cole	11	0	0	0	0	8	8	0.7
Rolder, Jimmy	12	0	0	0	0	2	2	0.2
Davis, Jadyn	3	-6	0	0	0	0	-6	-2.0
TEAM	13	-36	0	0	0	0	-36	-2.8
Total	**13**	**2732**	**2428**	**75**	**424**	**24**	**5683**	**437.2**
Opponent	**13**	**1455**	**2748**	**119**	**330**	**55**	**4707**	**362.1**

PUNT RETURNS	G	NO.	YARDS	AVG.	TD	LONG	YDS./G
Marsh, Andrew	13	4	45	11.2	0	14	3.5
Morgan, Semaj	11	13	30	2.3	0	13	2.7
Taylor, Joe	12	1	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
Total	**13**	**18**	**75**	**4.2**	**0**	**14**	**5.8**
Opponent	**13**	**17**	**119**	**7.0**	**0**	**20**	**9.2**

KICK RETURNS	G	NO.	YARDS	AVG.	TD	LONG	YDS./G
Marsh, Andrew	13	16	378	23.6	0	51	29.1
Taylor, Joe	12	1	20	20.0	0	20	1.7
Berry, Zeke	11	1	11	11.0	0	11	1.0
Marshall, Nate	11	1	11	11.0	0	11	1.0
Goodwin, Channing	13	1	3	3.0	0	3	0.2
Bell, Kendrick	13	1	1	1.0	0	1	0.1
Anwunah, Chibi	12	1	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
Taylor, Chase	10	1	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
Total	**13**	**23**	**424**	**18.4**	**0**	**51**	**32.6**
Opponent	**13**	**17**	**330**	**19.4**	**0**	**33**	**25.4**

PUNTING	G	NO.	AVG.	LONG	BLK.	TB	FC	50+	I20
Hollenbeck, Hudson	13	40	43.2	67	0	3	10	11	10
Sunderland, Beckham	13	1	35.0	35	0	0	0	0	0
TEAM	13	1	29.0	29	1	0	0	0	1
Total	**13**	**42**	**42.7**	**67**	**1**	**3**	**10**	**11**	**11**
Opponent	**13**	**57**	**43.6**	**59**	**1**	**4**	**13**	**15**	**16**

FIELD GOALS	G	MADE	ATT.	LONG	BLK.
Zvada, Dominic	13	25	17	56	0
Total	**13**	**25**	**17**	**56**	**0**
Opponent	**13**	**20**	**17**	**54**	**0**

SCORING	G	TD	FG	SAF	PAT-1	PAT-2	TOTAL	PG
Zvada, Dominic	13	0	17	0	43	0	94	7.2
Haynes, Justice	7	10	0	0	0	0	60	8.6
Marshall, Jordan	11	10	0	0	0	0	60	5.5
Underwood, Bryce	13	6	0	0	0	0	36	2.8
Marsh, Andrew	13	5	0	0	0	0	30	2.3
Kuzdzal, Bryson	9	4	0	0	0	0	24	2.7
McCulley, Donaven	13	3	0	0	0	0	18	1.4
Parker, Jasper	6	2	0	0	0	0	12	2.0
Bell, Kendrick	13	1	0	0	0	0	6	0.5
Klein, Marlin	11	1	0	0	0	0	6	0.5
Marshall, Zack	13	1	0	0	0	0	6	0.5
Morgan, Semaj	11	1	0	0	0	0	6	0.5
Total	**13**	**44**	**17**	**0**	**43**	**0**	**358**	**27.5**
Opponent	**13**	**31**	**17**	**0**	**28**	**0**	**265**	**20.4**

DEFENSE	G	SOLO	ASSIST	TOTAL	TFL-YDS.	SACK-YDS.	PD	FF	FR
Rolder, Jimmy	12	47	26	73	7-29	2-21	2	0	1
Hausmann, Ernest	10	44	24	68	5.5-22	1-7	1	0	0
Metcalf, TJ	13	37	21	58	2.5-5	0-0	4	0	1
Hillman, Brandyn	12	31	18	49	2.5-2	0-0	3	1	0
Sullivan, Cole	11	28	16	44	5-14	2-9	1	1	1
Hill, Jyaire	13	24	12	36	3-12	1-7	5	1	0
Benny, Rayshaun	13	19	16	35	3-18	1.5-15	2	0	1
Curtis, Mason	11	19	15	34	2-13	1-12	1	0	0
Berry, Zeke	11	26	7	33	0-0	0-0	10	0	0
Barham, Jaishawn	12	21	11	32	10-47	4-29	3	1	0
Mangham, Jaden	13	19	11	30	2-2	0-0	2	0	0
Moore, Derrick	12	19	11	30	10.5-98	10-97	3	2	1
Pierce, Trey	13	18	12	30	1-1	0-0	0	0	0
Bowles, Troy	13	16	11	27	2-12	1-11	0	1	0
Sanders, Jayden	13	16	7	23	0-0	0-0	1	0	0
Brandt, Cameron	13	12	10	22	1.5-6	0.5-3	0	0	0
Williams, Tré	13	12	8	20	5.5-12	0-0	1	0	0
Nichols, Dominic	12	14	5	19	5.5-33	1-7	0	0	0
Guy, T.J.	12	13	5	18	3-20	2.5-20	0	0	0
Payne, Damon	13	9	7	16	2-4	0-0	1	0	0
Etta, Enow	13	6	9	15	2.5-3	0.5-1	1	0	0
Young, Jordan	10	11	4	15	0-0	0-0	3	0	0
Dotson, Elijah	12	9	2	11	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Taylor, Chase	10	7	3	10	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Anderson, Caleb	7	5	2	7	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Marshall, Nate	11	3	3	6	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Moore, Rod	3	5	1	6	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Taylor, Joe	12	5	1	6	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Kuzdzal, Bryson	9	3	1	4	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Owusu-Boateng, Nathaniel	7	1	3	4	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Metcalf, Tevis	3	1	2	3	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Oden, Jacob	10	2	1	3	0-0	0-0	1	0	0
Forbes, Logan	13	2	0	2	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Iwunnah, Ikechukwu	8	2	0	2	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Tonielli, Deakon	13	2	0	2	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Winston, Kainoa	1	1	1	2	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Andrighetto, Nico	7	1	0	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Beigel, Manuel	7	1	0	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	1
Crippen, Greg	13	0	1	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Efobi, Nathan	13	1	0	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Guarnera, Jake	13	1	0	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Hoffman, Jalen	13	1	0	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Hollenbeck, Hudson	13	1	0	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Kanka, Bobby	1	1	0	1	1-1	0-0	0	0	0
Marsh, Andrew	13	0	1	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Marshall, Zack	13	0	1	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Moore, Fredrick	5	1	0	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Sunderland, Beckham	13	0	1	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0

INTERCEPTIONS	G	NO	YDS	AVG	TD	LG	YD/G
Sullivan, Cole	11	3	8	2.7	0	8	0.7
Curtis, Mason	11	1	14	14.0	0	14	1.3
Rolder, Jimmy	12	1	2	2.0	0	2	0.2
Berry, Zeke	11	1	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
Dotson, Elijah	12	1	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
Guy, T.J.	12	1	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
Hill, Jyaire	13	1	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
Hillman, Brandyn	12	1	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
Metcalf, TJ	13	1	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
Moore, Rod	3	1	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
Oden, Jacob	10	1	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
Total	**13**	**13**	**24**	**1.8**	**0**	**14**	**1.8**
Opponent	**13**	**10**	**55**	**5.5**	**0**	**29**	**4.2**

2025 MICHIGAN RESULTS

Date	Opponent	Result
Aug. 30	NEW MEXICO	W, 34-17
Sept. 6	at Oklahoma	L, 24-13
Sept. 13	CENTRAL MICHIGAN	W, 63-3
Sept. 20	at Nebraska	W, 30-27
Oct. 4	WISCONSIN	W, 24-10
Oct. 11	at USC	L, 31-13
Oct. 18	WASHINGTON	W, 24-7
Oct. 25	at Michigan State	W, 31-20
Nov. 1	PURDUE	W, 21-16
Nov. 15	vs. Northwestern*	W, 24-22
Nov. 22	at Maryland	W, 45-20
Nov. 29	OHIO STATE	L, 27-9
Dec. 31	vs. Texas^	L, 41-27

** at Wrigley Field in Chicago*

^ Cheez-It Citrus Bowl at Orlando, Fla.

TEAM STATISTICS

SCORING BY QUARTERS:

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	OT	Total
Michigan	92	86	99	81	0	358
Opponents	34	102	44	85	0	265

	U-M	OPP
Total First Downs	262	240
Rushing	134	89
Passing	113	128
Penalty	15	23
Total Net Yards	5160	4203
Total Plays	842	853
Yards Per Play	6.1	4.9
Yards Per Game	396.9	323.3
Rushing Attempts-Yards	502-2732	427-1455
Yards Per Attempt	5.4	3.4
Yards Per Game	210.2	111.9
Pass Att.-Comp.-Int.	340-202-10	426-271-13
Passing Yards	2428	2748
Yards Per Completion	12.0	10.1
Yards Per Game	186.8	211.4
Punting: No.-Avg.	42-42.7	57-43.6
Fumbles-Lost	13-7	11-6
Penalties-Yards	57-508	67-562
Sacks By-Yds. Lost	28-220	21-120
Third-Down Conversions	72-165	68-179
Conversion Pct.	43.6	38.0
Fourth-Down Conversions	7-18	17-28
Conversion Pct.	38.9	60.7
Avg. Time Of Possession	29:48	30:12

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J.J. McCarthy finished his career with a 27-1 record as Michigan's starting quarterback and led the Wolverines to the CFP national championship in the 2023 season.

PHOTO BY DOMINICK SOKOTOFF

Championship Contributors

Michigan's 2021 Recruiting Class Fuels Epic Run

BY ANTHONY BROOME

U-M's 2021 recruiting class came into the program during an awkward time. Much of their recruitment took place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and came off a 2020 season that went poorly, finishing with a 2-4 record in a truncated season and raising questions about the future under Jim Harbaugh. The class, headlined by four-star quarterback J.J. McCarthy, largely stuck together and decided it wanted to be the group that helped propel the program through its 10-win plateau that had been established in Harbaugh's first six years.

What followed was one of the most spectacular stretches of football in U-M's storied history — a 57-12 record (and counting, for Rod Moore), with three Big Ten championships, three College Football Playoff appearances and a 15-0 national championship season in 2023.

The class, which placed 15th in the On3 Industry Ranking, saw nine players stick it out through the duration of their careers, while another 13 finished elsewhere. Harbaugh and company signed 22 players in the cycle, headlined by running back Donovan Edwards (No. 34 overall), McCarthy (No. 47) and linebacker Junior Colson (No. 90) among the top-100 recruits in the country. Each of them would have storied careers and iconic moments wearing the winged helmet.

The class featured eight other four-star prospects, including defensive lineman Rayshaun Benny (No. 164), offensive linemen Giovanni El-Hadi (No. 218) and Raheem Anderson (No. 345), safety Rod Moore (No. 356), offensive lineman Greg Crippen (No. 360), linebacker Jaydon Hood (No. 384), wide receiver Christian Dixon (No. 386) and defensive lineman George Rooks (No. 387).

Among the rest of the class, edge TJ Guy (No. 981) would be the closest thing to a consistent contributor, playing out much of his career as a rotational player. Wide receiver Andrel Anthony (No. 585), an East Lansing native, had a notable turn as a true freshman in the Michigan State game in 2021, but never amounted to more than lightning in a bottle in Ann Arbor. Punter Tommy Doman (No. 1,448) made 31 game appearances and earned All-Big Ten honors in 2023, but finished his career at Florida. Defensive lineman Ikechukwu Iwunnah did not see game action for the first three seasons of his career, but worked himself into a depth role in 2024 and 2025.

Players like McCarthy and Edwards decided to come to Michigan because of the belief that they could be key figures in reestablishing the Wolverines as a national power. The prophecy was fulfilled in almost every way, and the story of the 2021 class is not yet finished with Moore returning for a sixth season in 2026.

Head coach Kyle Whittingham came to Ann Arbor to make the CFP and compete for national titles, and Moore could serve as a bridge between those eras as the lone Wolverine remaining on the roster from the 2021 recruiting cycle. ❑

TOP FIVE PLAYERS

1. J.J. McCarthy

McCarthy set the standard for excellence at quarterback in the modern era at U-M. Appearing in 40 games with 28 starts, McCarthy is the career program leader in interception rate (1.54 per 100 passes), completion percentage (67.6), pass efficiency (160.5) and touchdown-to-interception ratio (4.5:1), also finishing his career tied for fourth in career touchdown passes and sixth in touchdown percentage (6.87). He was a top-10 finisher for the Heisman Trophy in 2023 and took home the Big Ten Griese-Brees Big Ten Quarterback of the Year award in addition to All-Big Ten nods in 2022 (second team, media; third team, coaches) and 2023 (consensus first team). McCarthy was also the 2023 Rose Bowl Offensive MVP after going 17-for-27 for 221 yards passing with 3 touchdowns and 3 carries for 25 yards. McCarthy entered the 2024 NFL Draft, foregoing his final season of eligibility, and was chosen by the Minnesota Viking at No. 10 in the first round.

2. Junior Colson

Colson left Ann Arbor after three years with two All-Big Ten team selections (second team, coaches, 2022-23; second team, media, 2023; third team, media, 2022). He appeared in 43 games with 36 starts at linebacker, ending his career with 257 total tackles, 8.5 tackles for loss, 2.5 sacks, 5 passes defended and a fumble recovered. He was a recipient of the team's Roger Zatkoff Award in 2022 and Toughest Player Award in 2023, also sharing Defensive Player of the Year honors in 2023. Making an impact from the start, Colson also shared the team's Defensive Rookie of the Year in 2021. During the 2023 national championship season, Colson started all 15 games, leading the team with 95 tackles and earning a finalist spot for the Lott IMPACT Trophy. The Los Angeles Chargers selected Colson with the No. 69 overall pick (third round) in the 2024 NFL Draft.

3. Rod Moore

Moore is looking to regain his early form heading into his sixth season in Ann Arbor after missing the majority of the last two seasons with a knee injury. He has appeared in 40 career games with 29 starts, twice being voted a team captain. He has a chance to be the program's first three-time captain since Horace Prettyman in 1884-86 and could leave as one of the most decorated Wolverines ever in terms of wins. Moore is a two-time All-Big Ten selection (third team, coaches, 2023; honorable mention, media, 2022-23), and he shared team Defensive Rookie of the Year honors with Colson in 2021, along with grabbing a Special Teams Rookie of the Year nod. Moore has 147 career tackles, 2.5 tackles for loss, 7 interceptions and 8 passes defended.

4. Donovan Edwards

The West Bloomfield, Mich., native spent much of his career playing behind Hassan Haskins and Blake Corum but made some of the most impactful plays in program history during his four seasons with the Maize and Blue. He played in 50 games with 13 starts in the backfield and an additional start as a wide receiver. Edwards, a team captain in 2024, ran for 2,251 yards with 19 touchdowns along with 86 catches for 797 yards and 4 scores, also completing all 4 of his collegiate pass attempts for 131 yards and 2 touchdowns. He is the first player with multiple 40-plus-yard rushing touchdowns in the College Football Playoff national championship game (2024) and was part of the first backfield duo in CFP title game history to rush for 100-plus yards, along with Corum. The EA Sports College Football 25 cover athlete was an All-Big Ten honorable mention honoree from the coaches in 2024 and also won Big Ten Griffin-Grange Championship Game MVP honors in 2022 after a 25-carry, 185-yard and 1-touchdown performance in a 43-22 win over Purdue.

5. Rayshaun Benny

Benny, who hails from Detroit, appeared in 54 contests along the defensive line in Ann Arbor with 15 starts in his career. All but two of those starts came during the 2025 season, when he opened 13 games with 35 tackles, 3.0 tackles for loss, 1.5 sacks, a fumble recovery and 2 passes defended, earning third-team All-Big Ten recognition from the coaches and media. His play in 2025 earned him the program's Woodley-Graham Award, given to the team's best defensive lineman. Benny was selected in the 2026 NFL Draft by the Baltimore Ravens in the seventh round after spending five seasons in Ann Arbor.

Big Ten Teams' Overall Winning Percentages from 2021-25

Rk.	School	Rec.	Pct.
1.	Ohio State	59-10	.855
2.	Oregon*	58-12	.829
3.	***Michigan***	***57-12***	***.826***
4.	Penn State	48-20	.706
5.	Iowa	45-22	.672
6.	Washington*	44-22	.667
7.	Minnesota	40-25	.615
8.	USC*	39-26	.600
9.	Illinois	37-26	.587
10.	Indiana	36-29	.554
11.	UCLA*	33-29	.532
12.	Wisconsin	32-31	.508
13.	Maryland	31-32	.492
14.	Michigan State	29-32	.475
15.	Rutgers	28-35	.444
16.	Nebraska	26-36	.419
17.	Purdue	24-39	.381
18,	Northwestern	23-39	.371

** Completed first year in the Big Ten in 2024*

Defensive back Rod Moore, who returns for a sixth season in 2026, has appeared in 40 career games with 29 starts and been voted a team captain twice thus far.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Running back Donovan Edwards shined brightest on the biggest stages, including a Buckeye-busting 22 carries for 216 yards and 2 touchdowns in a 45-23 victory over rival Ohio State in 2022. He put the game away for Michigan on 85- and 75-yard touchdowns in the fourth quarter.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Michigan's 2021 recruiting class was headlined by J.J. McCarthy (left) and Junior Colson (right). They, along with Donovan Edwards (not pictured), were top-100 players nationally at their respective positions.

THE WOLVERINE, MARCH 2021

TOP FIVE PERFORMANCES

1. Donovan Edwards at Ohio State, 2022

Blake Corum injured his knee the previous week against Illinois and tried to give it a go against the Buckeyes, but it was clear from the jump that he couldn't. Enter Edwards, who carried 22 times for 216 yards and 2 touchdowns in a 45-23 victory over the rival Buckeyes. Most of his production came late, scoring 85- and 75-yard touchdowns in the fourth quarter to hand Ohio State its second straight loss in the series and keep U-M's undefeated season alive, clinching a berth in the Big Ten title game in back-to-back years.

2. J.J. McCarthy at Michigan State, 2023

Days after news broke of advanced scouting allegations within the U-M program, the Wolverines went to East Lansing to take on a Spartan team reeling after the dismissal of its head coach, Mel Tucker, and the administration voicing concern for player safety in the wake of the accusations. The junior quarterback gave them plenty to be worried about in a 49-0 drubbing at Spartan Stadium, going 21-for-27 for 287 yards and 4 touchdowns in a win over their in-state rivals in prime time. The performance was impressive enough that sportsbooks tabbed McCarthy the Heisman favorite after the game, though LSU's Jayden Daniels would win the award.

3. Donovan Edwards vs. Washington, 2023

Another big moment, another iconic performance from Edwards. Corum returned in 2023 as Michigan's bell cow at tailback and took the lion's share of the carries that season. Edwards had a bit of a backseat and struggled throughout the year, but showed up in the 34-13 win over Washington in the College Football Playoff national championship game. He reeled off touchdown runs of 41 and 46 yards, respectively, on the first two U-M possessions to put the Wolverines up 14-3 in the first quarter. Edwards finished the game with 6 carries for 104 yards and the 2 scoring runs.

4. J.J. McCarthy at Ohio State, 2022

Just like Edwards, McCarthy gets another spot on this list. He had to shoulder more of the load in the OSU game in 2022 with Corum down. After a slow start, the passing game came alive with McCarthy completing 12-of-24 passes for 263 yards and touchdown throws of 69, 75 and 45 yards, respectively, in the game. Cornelius Johnson caught two of them, and tight end Colston Loveland pulled down the other in the third quarter to give U-M a lead it would never relinquish. He also added 6 carries for 27 yards, including a 3-yard touchdown in the fourth quarter.

5. Rod Moore vs. Ohio State, 2023

One of the defining achievements of this class was its success over the Buckeyes, and defensive back Rod Moore, an Ohio native, experienced the win during his junior campaign. Moore contributed 5 total tackles and an interception in U-M's epic 30-24 win over Ohio State in 2023, which included the game-sealing takeaway with 25 seconds to go. It kept U-M's undefeated year going heading into a third straight Big Ten title with wins over Alabama and Washington to follow.

Final Grade: B

Compared to the 2020 class, this haul was a bit lighter on high-end impact but still had players who factored into several iconic wins and moments. The most impactful signee for Michigan was McCarthy, finally giving the program a star signal-caller that panned out in Harbaugh's sixth full recruiting cycle. His arm talent, athleticism and competitiveness served as one of the major reasons that the Wolverines were able to push through their postseason plateau and win a national championship. Edwards was not as consistent a tailback as some thought he might be, but his legendary performances against Ohio State and in the national title game will go down as some of the most memorable in program history. Colson was a steady force at linebacker and tremendous at cleaning up plays at the second level and being reliable when called upon to make plays.

Three players from this cycle would become NFL Draft selections in McCarthy, Colson and Benny. The story is still being written for Moore, who could have entered the NFL Draft in 2024 but decided to return, then spent the next two years injured.

Like any recruiting class, there are always misses and transfers, especially in the era of player movement year over year.

NFL DRAFT PICKS

QB J.J. McCarthy — Minnesota Vikings; first round, No. 10 overall in 2024
LB Junior Colson — Los Angeles Chargers; third round, No. 69 overall in 2024
DT Rayshaun Benny — Baltimore Ravens; seventh round, No. 250 overall in 2026

Linebacker Junior Colson led the Wolverines in tackles in 2022 and '23. He was picked by his college coach Jim Harbaugh (left) and the Los Angeles Chargers in the 2024 NFL Draft.

PHOTO BY DOMINICK SOKOTOFF

CLASS RANKINGS

Rivals Industry Ranking – 15th
On3 – 14th
ESPN.com – 11th
247 Sports – 13th
Rivals – 11th

Starters (7)

Rayshaun Benny (16 career starts)
Junior Colson (36)
Greg Crippen (21)
Donovan Edwards (14)
Giovanni El-Hadi (25)
J.J. McCarthy (28)
Rod Moore (29)

Specialists/Key Reserves (2)

TJ Guy (7)
Ike Iwunnah

Departures (13)

Raheem Anderson
Andrel Anthony
Kechaun Bennett
Tristan Bounds
Cristian Dixon
Tommy Doman
Tavierre Dunlap
Dominick Guidice
Louis Hansen
Jaydon Hood
Ja'Den McBurrows
Tyler McLaurin
George Rooks

YEAR-BY-YEAR RECORD

2021: 12-2, 8-1 Big Ten, Orange Bowl (CFP Semifinal) vs. Georgia (L, 34-11). Final Rankings: AP No. 3, Coaches No. 3
2022: 13-1, 9-0 Big Ten, Fiesta Bowl (CFP Semifinal) vs. TCU (L, 51,45). Final Rankings: AP No. 3, Coaches No. 3
2023: 15-0, 9-0 Big Ten, Rose Bowl (CFP Semifinal) vs. Alabama (W, 27-20 OT), CFP National Championship vs. Washington (W, 34-13). Final Rankings: AP No. 1, Coaches No. 1
2024: 8-5, 5-4 Big Ten, ReliaQuest Bowl vs. Alabama (W, 19-13). Final Rankings: AP unranked, Coaches unranked
2025: 9-4, 7-2 Big Ten, Cheez-It Citrus Bowl vs. Texas (L, 42-27). Final Rankings: AP No. 21, Coaches No. 22

FIVE-YEAR RECORD

Overall: 57-12 (.826)
Big Ten: 38-7 (.844)
Bowl Games: 3-3
Versus Ohio State: 4-1
Versus Michigan State: 4-1
Top-20 AP Finishes: 3 – 2021, 2022, 2023

Class Of 2021 Summary

Name	Position	Appearances	Ind. Grade
Andrel Anthony	**WR**	**26**	**C-**

Anthony will be remembered for his 6-catch, 155-yard and 2-touchdown performance at Michigan State in 2021, but he totaled only 19 receptions in two seasons with the Wolverines before transferring to Oklahoma. Anthony spent two years with the Sooners, then transferred to Duke in 2025, hauling in 26 catches for 246 yards and 5 touchdowns.

Raheem Anderson	**OL**	**18**	**D**

The 6-foot-3, 318-pounder saw action in 18 outings over four seasons and transferred to Western Michigan for his final collegiate season in 2025.

Kechaun Bennett	**EDGE**	**28**	**D-**

Played in 28 career clashes, totaling 7 tackles. Bennett transferred to UCLA for the 2025 season, racking up 25 tackles and a sack.

Rayshaun Benny	**DT**	**54**	**B**

The Detroit native suited up for 54 contests with 15 starts during his U-M career, including 13 opening assignments during the 2025 season, where he totaled 35 tackles, 3 for loss, 1.5 sacks, 2 passes defended and a fumble recovery. He earned third-team All-Big Ten honors from the coaches and media in 2025. The Baltimore Ravens selected him in the seventh round of the 2026 NFL Draft.

Tristan Bounds	**OL**	**7**	**D-**

Appeared in just seven games in four seasons and transferred to Arizona in 2025, appearing in 10 games. He will play his final collegiate season in 2026.

Junior Colson	**LB**	**43**	**A**

From Haiti to Nashville to Ann Arbor and now Los Angeles, the two-time second-team All-Big Ten selection became the No. 69 overall pick in the 2024 NFL Draft by the Chargers. Colson lived up to his billing as an elite recruit, leading the Wolverines in tackles in the 2022-23 seasons (101 in 2022 and 95 in 2023).

Greg Crippen	**OL**	**40**	**B**

Crippen appeared in 40 career games and made 21 starts at center, all coming over the last two seasons. He earned honorable mention All-Big Ten recognition from the media for his performance in 2025.

Cristian Dixon	**WR**	**6**	**F**

Transferred to Central Missouri in 2025 following three seasons of being buried on the Wolverines' depth chart, with only six appearances.

Tommy Doman	**P**	**31**	**B-**

Appeared in 31 games in four seasons and started at punter in 2023-24 before transferring to Florida for his fifth season in 2025. He earned All-Big Ten recognition in 2024 (third team, coaches; honorable mention, media) and was named to PFF's 2025 All-SEC Team.

Tavierre Dunlap	**RB**	**33**	**C**

Rushed for 138 yards and a touchdown on 22 carries in 33 games played at U-M and spent the final year of his career at Eastern Michigan, accumulating 428 yards and 5 touchdowns.

Donovan Edwards	**RB**	**50**	**B+**

Edwards had a pair of long touchdown runs in two of the biggest games in program history — 75 and 85 yards in a 45-23 win over Ohio State in 2022, and 41 and 46 yards in a 34-13 victory over Washington in the 2023 national championship game. Appeared in 50 career games with 13 starts in his career and compiled 2,251 rushing yards and 19 touchdowns, along with 131 yards passing and 2 touchdowns and 86 catches for 797 yards and 4 touchdowns.

Giovanni El-Hadi	**OL**	**51**	**B**

Voted a captain by teammates in 2025, El-Hadi appeared in 51 games with 23 starts during his career. He made three starts as a sophomore in 2022 before starting 22 games between the 2024 and 2025 seasons. El-Hadi was a two-time All-Big Ten selection (third team, coaches, 2025; honorable mention, coaches, 2024, media, 2024-25).

Dominick Giudice	**OL**	**18**	**C**

Switched from defensive line to offensive line in 2023 and appeared in 18 games before transferring to Missouri in 2025, where he appeared in 10 games with five starts at center during the 2024 season.

TJ Guy	**EDGE**	**48**	**B-**

Voted an alternate captain by his teammates in 2025, Guy appeared in 48 games with eight starts during his time in Ann Arbor. He recorded 66 total tackles, 12.5 tackles for loss, 10 sacks and an interception over five years.

Louis Hansen	**TE**	**3**	**F**

Played in three games from 2021-22 at Michigan before transferring to UConn. He grabbed 46 passes for 463 yards and 4 touchdowns in three years in Storrs.

Jaydon Hood	**LB**	**26**	**D+**

Suited up for 26 games with 13 appearances at linebacker in five seasons but did not see game action in 2025. Hood transferred to Georgia State for the 2026 campaign.

Ike Iwunnah	**DT**	**19**	**C-**

The late-blooming contributor did not see game action in 2021-23 before making 19 appearances over his final two seasons, recording 10 total tackles as a reserve.

Ja'Den McBurrows	**CB**	**19**	**C-**

McBurrows appeared in 19 games in four seasons at Michigan while working through various injuries. He transferred to Appalachian State in 2025 and will return for the 2026 season.

J.J. McCarthy	**QB**	**40**	**A+**

Finished his career with a 27-1 record as Michigan's starting quarterback before becoming tied as the Wolverines' highest-drafted signal-caller in history (Forest Evashevski, 1941), going No. 10 overall to the Minnesota Vikings in 2024. In 2023, McCarthy was named first-team All-Big Ten and became U-M's first-ever winner of the Griese-Brees Big Ten Quarterback of the Year award, completing 72.2 percent of his passes for 2,991 yards and 22 touchdowns. He ranks fourth in program history with 482 career completions and sixth with 6,226 passing yards.

Tyler McLaurin	**Edge**	**18**	**D+**

Appeared in 18 games during his collegiate career before transitioning into a coaching internship at U-M.

Rod Moore	**S**	**40**	**A-**

The Clayton, Ohio, native and two-time captain "called game" against Ohio State in 2023, notching an interception with 25 seconds to go that sealed a 30-24 victory. The 2023 third-team All-Big Ten standout has started 28 of the 40 games he has played in to date. He missed the 2024 season after suffering a torn ACL in spring camp and played in three games in 2025. Moore returns to the program for a sixth season in 2026.

George Rooks	**DT**	**9**	**D**

Appeared in 46 games over five seasons at Michigan, Boston College and Syracuse with 72 tackles, 5.5 tackles for loss, 2.5 sacks, a forced fumble, fumble recovery and pass defended. Spent his first two years in Ann Arbor with nine appearances before two years at BC (2023-24) and a season at Syracuse (2025).

Pro Blue

Michigan Wolverines In The NFL

BY CLAYTON SAYFIE

Tight end AJ Barner, in his second year as a pro, helped the Seattle Seahawks to a 29-13 victory against the New England Patriots in Super Bowl LX. He caught 4 passes for 54 yards and a touchdown in the championship win.
PHOTO BY EDWIN HOOPER/SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

Name	Pos.	Years In Pro Football	Current Team
Erick All Jr.	*TE*	*2*	*Cincinnati Bengals*

Participating in offseason activities after a torn ACL suffered in November 2024 held him out of the entire 2025 campaign ... Made 20 catches for 158 yards as a rookie in 2024.

Jaishawn Barham	*LB*	*R*	*Dallas Cowboys*

The third-round selection is set to begin as an off-ball linebacker with the possibility of also playing edge rusher.

AJ Barner	*TE*	*2*	*Seattle Seahawks*

Made 52 catches for 519 yards and 6 touchdowns during the regular season ... Hauled in 6 receptions for 67 yards during the playoffs ... Scored a touchdown in a 29-13 Super Bowl win over the New England Patriots.

Karsen Barnhart	*OL*	*2*	*Green Bay Packers*

Agreed to a reserve/future contract with Green Bay after competing on the Packers' practice squad at the end of last season.

Ronnie Bell	*WR*	*3*	*New Orleans Saints*

Spent time on the Saints' practice squad last season and recorded 2 catches for 23 yards and a touchdown in two games at the end of the year.

Name	Pos.	Years In Pro Football	Current Team
Rayshaun Benny	*DL*	*R*	*Baltimore Ravens*

The seventh-round draft choice is reunited with former U-M defensive coordinator Jesse Minter (now the Ravens' head coach) and former defensive line coach Lou Esposito.

Ben Bredeson	*OG*	*6*	*Tampa Bay Buccaneers*

Started all 11 games before suffering a season-ending knee injury last season ... Recorded a 53.4 overall PFF rating.

Max Bredeson	*FB*	*R*	*Minnesota Vikings*

Picked in the fifth round and is again teammates with former classmate quarterback J.J. McCarthy ... Projected to start at fullback, following the retirement of C.J. Ham.

Devin Bush	*LB*	*7*	*Chicago Bears*

Inked a three-year deal with the Bears, after two with the Cleveland Browns (2024-25) ... Posted a career-high 125 tackles, which ranked 21st in the NFL, with 2 sacks, 2 forced fumbles, 3 interceptions and 1 fumble recovery last season.

Zach Charbonnet	*RB*	*3*	*Seattle Seahawks*

Tallied 184 rush attempts for 730 yards and 12 touchdowns while hauling in 20

receptions for 144 yards in the regular season ... Went down with a torn ACL in the divisional round of the playoffs before the Seahawks made a run to win the Super Bowl ... Slated to be out until at least December 2026.

Nico Collins *WR* *5* *Houston Texans*
Made 71 catches for 1,117 yards (the second-most of any season in his career and the ninth-best mark in the NFL) and 6 touchdowns in 15 regular-season clashes ... His 15.7 yards per catch ranked fifth in the league.

Junior Colson *LB* *2* *Los Angeles Chargers*
Missed the entire 2025 season with a shoulder injury, after appearing in 11 contests as a rookie in 2024 ... Expected to compete for a backup spot on the roster for head coach Jim Harbaugh.

Blake Corum *RB* *2* *Los Angeles Rams*
Split carries with Kyren Williams but earned more opportunities as the season went along ... Rushed 145 times for 746 yards and 6 touchdowns, while reeling in 8 catches for 36 yards ... The split between Williams and Corum is projected to be much more balanced this fall.

Greg Crippen *C* *R* *Pittsburgh Steelers*
Signed as an undrafted free agent.

Mike Danna *DE* *6* *Buffalo Bills*
Signed by the Buffalo Bills in free agency, following six seasons with the Kansas City Chiefs ... Made 14 starts and recorded 25 tackles, 1 sack, 1 interception, 4 quarterback hits and 3 tackles for loss in 2025 ... Posted 21.5 career sacks.

Tommy Doman Jr. *P* *R* *Buffalo Bills*
The former Michigan (2021-24) and Florida (2025) punter was selected in the seventh round ... Will battle with Mitch Wishnowsky for the starting job.

Donovan Edwards *RB* *1* *Miami Dolphins*
Spent the majority of 2025 on practice squads with the New York Jets and Washington Commanders, prior to being picked up by the Miami Dolphins and added to the active roster for the end of the season.

Rashan Gary *DL* *7* *Dallas Cowboys*
Traded from the Green Bay Packers for a fourth-round pick in 2027 ... Played in 16 games with 15 starts last season, notching 45 tackles, 7.5 sacks and 7 tackles for loss.

Graham Glasgow *OL* *10* *Free agent*
Released by the Detroit Lions, where he played seven of his 10 NFL seasons (2016-19, 2023-25) in between a stint with the Denver Broncos.

Brandon Graham *DE* *16* *Philadelphia Eagles*
Retired ahead of the 2025 season but returned midyear and totaled 8 tackles and 3 sacks in nine regular-season tilts ... Announced he will play in 2026, his last season in the NFL.

Mason Graham *DT* *1* *Cleveland Browns*
The No. 5 overall pick in the 2025 NFL Draft was tabbed to the Pro Football Writers of America All-Rookie team ... Tallied 49 tackles, 7 TFL, a half-sack and 4 pass breakups while starting all 17 games.

Kenneth Grant *DT* *1* *Miami Dolphins*
Posted 33 tackles, 2 TFL, 2 sacks and 1 pass breakup in 17 appearances with five starts, after being picked No. 13 overall in the 2025 draft.

TJ Guy *LB* *R* *Free agent*
The undrafted free agent was reportedly going to sign with the Baltimore Ravens April 26 but didn't appear at their rookie minicamp.

Jaylen Harrell *OLB* *2* *Tennessee Titans*
Racked up 25 tackles, 5 TFL and 4.5 sacks in 17 games with two starts in his second year.

Hassan Haskins *RB* *4* *Free agent*
Became a free agent this offseason, with his two-year contract with the Los Angeles Chargers having expired ... Rushed 27 times for 47 yards and caught 4 passes for 13 yards in 12 appearances in 2025.

Ryan Hayes *OT* *3* *Tennessee Titans*
Signed by the Tennessee Titans this offseason ... Has spent time with the Miami Dolphins, Indianapolis Colts and Atlanta Falcons.

LaDarius Henderson *OG* *2* *Indianapolis Colts*
Signed this offseason to a reserve/future contract with the Colts ... Was waived by the Houston Texans last August and bounced around on practice squads during the season.

AJ Henning *WR* *1* *Miami Dolphins*
On a reserve/future contract with the Dolphins after working on their practice squad last year.

Matthew Hibner *TE* *R* *Baltimore Ravens*
The Michigan (2020-23) and SMU (2024-25) transfer was selected in the fourth round of the draft and is expected to compete for a backup job behind Mark Andrews.

Dax Hill *CB* *4* *Cincinnati Bengals*
Started all 17 games in 2025, recording 88 tackles, 2 TFL, 11 pass breakups and 1 interception.

Nikhai Hill-Green *ILB* *R* *Los Angeles Rams*
Former Michigan (2020-22), Charlotte (2023), Colorado (2024) and Alabama (2025) linebacker joined the Rams as an undrafted free agent.

Myles Hinton *OT* *1* *Philadelphia Eagles*
Didn't appear in any games as a rookie and will compete at left tackle this fall.

In his rookie season, Josaiah Stewart totaled 28 tackles, 3 TFL, 3 sacks, 2 pass break-ups and a forced fumble while playing in all 20 games for the Los Angeles Rams.

PHOTO COURTESY LOS ANGELES RAMS

Top Five NFL Seasons In 2025

PHOTO COURTESY DETROIT LIONS

1. DE Aidan Hutchinson, Detroit Lions

Named to the Associated Press All-Pro second team, Aidan Hutchinson had a tremendous 2025 campaign coming off the season-ending leg injury sustained the previous October. The 6-foot-7, 268-pounder tallied 54 tackles, along with 14.5 sacks to rank fourth in the NFL. His 100 pressures tied as the second-most in the league, along with the Los Angeles Rams' Jared Verse and Jacksonville's Josh Hines-Allen and behind only Houston's Will Anderson Jr.

2. WR Nico Collins, Houston Texans

For the second time in his career, joining the 2023 campaign, Nico Collins finished top 10 in the NFL in total receiving yards, putting up a team-high 1,117 to tie for ninth. The 6-foot-4, 222-pounder earned a spot in the Pro Bowl while catching 71 passes and scoring 6 touchdowns.

3. OL Michael Onwenu, New England Patriots

Michael Onwenu started every game at right guard for the AFC champion New England Patriots, ranking ninth among NFL guards with a 77.1 overall PFF rating (minimum 100 snaps). Notably, Onwenu was terrific in pass protection, grading out at 78.2 to check in fourth among the same group.

PHOTO COURTESY CHICAGO BEARS

4. TE Colston Loveland, Chicago Bears

Even as a rookie, Colston Loveland was quarterback Caleb Williams' favorite target. He was targeted 106 times, with 70 receptions for 906 yards and 6 touchdowns between the regular season and playoffs. Loveland made a team-high 9 contested catches, per Pro Football Focus, and moved the chains for first downs 44 times out of his 70 catches.

5. TE AJ Barner, Seattle Seahawks

The league's 15th-best run-blocking tight end per PFF (minimum 100 snaps) was a difference-maker in the passing game, too, with 52 receptions for 519 yards and 6 touchdowns during the regular season. Barner had a quiet postseason until the Super Bowl, when he made 4 grabs for 54 yards and 1 touchdown in the victory over New England.

James Hudson III | *OT* | *5* | *New England Patriots*
Agreed to a one-year deal with the New England Patriots ... Competed in 11 contests with two starts at left tackle for the New York Giants but was let go in the middle of the 2025 season.

Maurice Hurst | *DT* | *8* | *Free agent*
Signed back with the Cleveland Browns midseason in 2025, appearing in two games ... Played in 65 contests with 19 starts in his career and is now searching for a new home.

Aidan Hutchinson | *DL* | *4* | *Detroit Lions*
Ranked fourth in the NFL with 14.5 sacks and added 54 tackles, 14 TFL, 4 forced fumbles, 3 pass breakups, 1 fumble recovery and 1 interception ... Finished second in the 2025 NFL Comeback Player of the Year balloting after coming off a broken leg suffered in October 2024.

Kris Jenkins | *DT* | *2* | *Cincinnati Bengals*
Recorded 36 tackles, 2 TFL and 1.5 sacks in 14 appearances with four starts last season ... Slated to back up Jonathan Allen and newly acquired Dexter Lawrence on the interior of the defensive line.

Cornelius Johnson | *WR* | *2* | *Baltimore Ravens*
Spent last season on the Baltimore Ravens' practice squad and will compete for a roster spot.

Will Johnson | *CB* | *1* | *Arizona Cardinals*
Notched 37 tackles, 2 TFL, 10 pass breakups and 1 forced fumble in 12 games with 10 starts as a rookie, earning Pro Football Writers of America All-Rookie recognition.

Trevor Keegan | *OG* | *1* | *Dallas Cowboys*
Appeared in only two outings last year, including one on the offensive line at left guard.

Marlin Klein | *TE* | *R* | *Houston Texans*
Fourth-highest tight end selection as a second-round pick, No. 59 overall.

Jourdan Lewis | *CB* | *9* | *Jacksonville Jaguars*
Recorded 39 tackles, 5 TFL, 10 pass breakups, 2 interceptions and 1 fumble recovery in 12 contests with seven starts, before suffering a season-ending foot injury in late-December.

David Long Jr. | *CB* | *7* | *Free agent*
Spent part of last season on the Indianapolis Colts' practice squad.

Colston Loveland | *TE* | *1* | *Chicago Bears*
First-round pick made 58 catches for 713 yards and 6 scores in 16 regular-season games with 11 starts ... Went off for 12 catches and 193 yards in two playoff contests ... Landed on ESPN's All-Rookie Team and chosen as the Bears' Rookie of the Year.

J.J. McCarthy | *QB* | *2* | *Minnesota Vikings*
Will battle with former Arizona Cardinals signal-caller Kyler Murray for the starting job ... Went 6-4 in 10 starts but dealt with injuries ... Completed 57.6 percent of his passes (140-of-243) for 1,632 yards and 11 touchdowns with 12 interceptions ... Added 181 rushing yards and 4 scores on 37 attempts.

Donaven McCulley | *WR* | *R* | *Miami Dolphins*
Signed as undrafted free agent.

Braiden McGregor | *EDGE* | *2* | *New York Jets*
Posted 15 tackles, 1 sack, 1 TFL and 1 pass breakup in 12 appearances off the bench in 2025.

Cameron McGrone | *LB* | *5* | *Las Vegas Raiders*
Was on the Indianapolis Colts and Cleveland Browns last season and signed with the Raiders this offseason ... Tallied 2 tackles in five tilts in 2025.

Former Wolverines With New Teams In 2026

Player	2025 Team	2026 Team
Devin Bush	Cleveland Browns	Chicago Bears
Mike Danna	Kansas City Chiefs	Buffalo Bills
Rashan Gary	Green Bay Packers	Dallas Cowboys
James Hudson III	New York Giants	New England Patriots
Cameron McGrone	Cleveland Browns	Las Vegas Raiders
David Ojabo	Baltimore Ravens	Miami Dolphins
Kwity Paye	Indianapolis Colts	Las Vegas Raiders
Benjamin St-Juste	Los Angeles Chargers	Green Bay Packers
Josh Uche	Philadelphia Eagles	Miami Dolphins
Ben VanSumeren	Philadelphia Eagles	Buffalo Bills

Sean McKeon *TE* *6* *Indianapolis Colts*
Played in one game in 2025.

Joshua Metellus *S* *6* *Minnesota Vikings*
Totaled 86 tackles, 1 TFL, a half-sack, 6 pass breakups and 2 interceptions while starting 14 games last year ... Named by Vikings Territory as the fifth-best defender on the team entering the season.

Joe Milton *QB* *2* *Dallas Cowboys*
Competed in four games last year, completing 15 of his 24 passes for 183 yards and 1 touchdown with 2 picks.

Jake Moody *K* *3* *Washington Commanders*
Expected to be the Commanders' starting kicker this season ... Went 10-of-11 on field goals with a 56-yard long in six games for the franchise a year ago, after bouncing from the San Francisco 49ers (1-of-3 in one game) and Chicago Bears (8-of-9 in two games) earlier in the year.

Derrick Moore *DE* *R* *Detroit Lions*
Drafted in the second round and will compete for snaps to play alongside Aidan Hutchinson.

Mike Morris *DE* *3* *Seattle Seahawks*
Appeared in 17 regular-season contests, racking up 18 tackles, including 2 for loss ... Saw action in all three playoff games with 4 tackles en route to the Seahawks' Super Bowl victory.

R.J. Moten *LB* *1* *Free agent*
Spent last season on the New England Patriots' practice squad.

Kalel Mullings *RB* *1* *Tennessee Titans*
Amassed 7 yards on 3 carries in nine games as a rookie, dealing with injury much of the way ... Set to compete for backup snaps behind Tony Pollard.

Drake Nugent *OL* *2* *San Francisco 49ers*
Hasn't played in any games during his two years in the league.

David Ojabo *EDGE* *4* *Miami Dolphins*
Signed with the Miami Dolphins this offseason, following a 16-tackle year in 14 games with the Baltimore Ravens.

Olu Oluwatimi *C* *4* *Seattle Seahawks*
Saw action in eight contests with four starts last regular season and played off the bench in two playoff games.

Mike Onwenu *OL* *6* *New England Patriots*
Started at right guard in all 21 games (17 regular season, four playoff) in 2025 ... Led the Patriots offensive line with a 77.1 overall PFF grade.

Makari Paige *S* *1* *Pittsburgh Steelers*
Signed with the New York Giants and was on their practice squad last season.

Kwity Paye *DE* *5* *Las Vegas Raiders*
Signed with the Las Vegas Raiders as an unrestricted free agent after five years with the Indianapolis Colts, where he totaled 37 TFL and 30.5 sacks in 75 games with 74 starts ... Registered 39 tackles, 6 TFL, 4 sacks and 1 pass breakup in 2025.

Damon Payne *DT* *R* *Kansas City Chiefs*
Picked up as an undrafted free agent.

Donovan Peoples-Jones *WR* *5* *Free agent*
Hasn't seen game action in the NFL since 2023 with the Cleveland Browns and Detroit Lions ... Released by the New Orleans Saints ahead of the 2025 campaign.

Jabrill Peppers *S* *9* *Free agent*
Unrestricted free agent after playing in 14 games with two starts and tallying 16 tackles for the Pittsburgh Steelers last year.

Josh Priebe *OL* *1* *Miami Dolphins*
Spent the majority of last season on the practice squad.

Brad Robbins *P* *3* *Free agent*
Punted in one game with 4 attempts for 158 yards (39.5-yard average) in 2025.

Josh Ross *LB* *4* *Minnesota Vikings*
Signed with the Minnesota Vikings' practice squad in 2025 and is looking to make the team.

Cesar Ruiz *C/G* *6* *New Orleans Saints*
Logged 14 starts at right guard in 2025, posting a 55.1 overall PFF rating ... Projects to start at the same position this fall.

Jon Runyan *OG* *6* *New York Giants*
Started 16 contests at left guard, recording a 52.9 overall PFF grade ... Set to start at the same spot.

Mike Sainristil *CB* *2* *Washington Commanders*
Registered 85 tackles, 1 TFL, 12 pass breakups, 1 forced fumble and a career-high 4 interceptions in 17 contests with 14 starts ... Set to again play corner and nickel.

Luke Schoonmaker *TE* *3* *Dallas Cowboys*
Hauled in 14 catches for 132 yards in 17 outings with seven starts in 2025 ... Competing for backup snaps behind starter Jake Ferguson.

Mazi Smith *DT* *3* *New York Jets*
Traded midseason from the Dallas Cowboys ... Played in eight games, five for the Cowboys and three for the Jets ... In the mix to make the roster this year.

Josaiah Stewart *OLB* *1* *Los Angeles Rams*
Accumulated 22 tackles, 3 TFL, 3 sacks, 2 pass breakups and 1 forced fumble in 17 regular-season appearances off the bench ... Played in all three playoff games, registering 6 tackles.

Andrew Stueber *OL* *4* *Atlanta Falcons*
Hasn't played in an NFL game since 2024.

Benjamin St-Juste *CB* *5* *Green Bay Packers*
Signed with the Packers in free agency, after appearing in 16 tilts with two starts last season, recording 29 tackles, an interception and 7 pass breakups for the Los Angeles Chargers.

Ambry Thomas *CB* *5* *Philadelphia Eagles*
Inked a reserve/future contract with the Philadelphia Eagles for this season.

DJ Turner II *CB* *3* *Cincinnati Bengals*
Tallied 40 tackles, 2 TFL, 18 pass breakups (tied for third in the NFL), 2 forced fumbles, 1 fumble recovery and 2 interceptions in 17 games with 16 starts ... Projected starter opposite of Dax Hill at corner.

Joshua Uche | *EDGE* | *6* | *Miami Dolphins*

Signed with the Dolphins in free agency ... Played last year with the Philadelphia Eagles, registering 23 tackles, 2 TFL, 1 sack and 1 pass breakup in 12 outings.

Ben VanSumeren | *FB* | *3* | *Buffalo Bills*

Suffered a season-ending injury in last year's opener for the Philadelphia Eagles ... Signed by the Bills to a one-year deal this offseason.

Dan Villari | *TE* | *R* | *Los Angeles Rams*

The former Michigan quarterback (2020-21) turned Syracuse tight end (2022-25) was signed as an undrafted free agent.

William Wagner | *LS* | *1* | *Cincinnati Bengals*

Snapped in all 17 games in 2025.

Josh Wallace | *CB* | *2* | *Los Angeles Rams*

The 2024 undrafted free agent has played in 32 games over the last two seasons, putting up 20 tackles, 3 pass breakups and an interception in 15 contests a year ago.

Julius Welschof | *OLB* | *2* | *Pittsburgh Steelers*

Yet to appear in an NFL game.

Roman Wilson | *WR* | *2* | *Pittsburgh Steelers*

Projected to start alongside DK Metcalf and Ben Skowronek in 2026, following a 12-catch, 166-yard, 2-touchdown season with 13 appearances and four starts.

Chris Wormley | *DT* | *8* | *Free Agent*

Signed by the Indianapolis Colts in the middle of last season, appearing in five games and making 7 tackles, 1 TFL and 1 sack.

Zak Zinter | *OG* | *2* | *Cleveland Browns*

Saw time in five clashes in 2025 and projects as the No. 2 left guard.

Dominic Zvada | *K* | *R* | *New York Giants*

The No. 2 kicker on The Athletic analyst Dane Brugler's big board, Zvada was picked up as an undrafted free agent and has a shot to beat out Jason Sanders and Ben Sauls for the starting job.

BY THE NUMBERS

The 2025 NFL Season

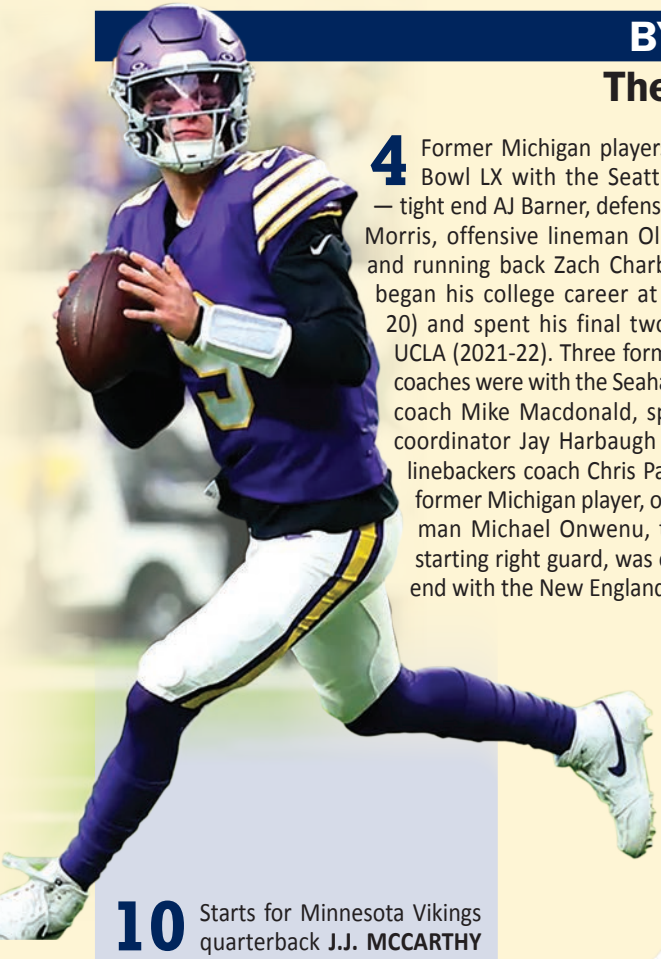


PHOTO COURTESY PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

4 Former Michigan players won Super Bowl LX with the Seattle Seahawks — tight end AJ Barner, defensive end Mike Morris, offensive lineman Olu Oluwatimi and running back Zach Charbonnet, who began his college career at U-M (2019-20) and spent his final two seasons at UCLA (2021-22). Three former Michigan coaches were with the Seahawks — head coach Mike Macdonald, special teams coordinator Jay Harbaugh and outside linebackers coach Chris Partridge. One former Michigan player, offensive lineman Michael Onwenu, the Patriots' starting right guard, was on the losing end with the New England Patriots.

12th Straight season with at least one former Michigan player winning the Super Bowl.

226.2 Fantasy points (points per reception) for Houston Texans wide receiver Nico Collins in 2025, ranking 42nd among players at all positions.

427 All-time NFL Draft picks for Michigan football, including six this spring in defensive end Derrick Moore (second round to the Detroit Lions), tight end Marlin Klein (second round to the Houston Texans), linebacker Jaishawn Barham (third round to the Dallas Cowboys), linebacker Jimmy Rolder (fourth round to the Detroit Lions), fullback Max Bredeson (fifth round to the Minnesota Vikings) and defensive tackle Rayshaun Benny (seventh round to the Baltimore Ravens). The Wolverines rank fourth all-time behind Notre Dame, USC and Ohio State.

10 Starts for Minnesota Vikings quarterback **J.J. MCCARTHY** in his first healthy and second overall NFL season, going 6-4. Before that, the last former Michigan player to start at quarterback in the league was Tom Brady for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 2022.

PHOTO BY ANDY KENUTIS/MINNESOTA VIKINGS

68.7 Overall PFF grade for Cleveland Browns lineman **MASON GRAHAM**, the second-highest among rookie interior defensive linemen.

PHOTO BY RIC KRUSZYNSKI/CLEVELAND BROWNS

2027 RECRUITING PRIORITIES

Michigan's New Staff Is Off To A Strong Start On Meeting Their Needs

BY ETHAN MCDOWELL

Michigan's 2027 recruiting cycle started to pick up steam around mid-April. Rivals300 quarterback Kamden Lopati chose the Wolverines, flipping from Illinois and committing to Michigan over Georgia, Notre Dame, Florida and many others.

The class was off to a relatively slow start at that point, while the new staff tried to rebuild Michigan's recruiting momentum and forge new connections in the Midwest. A lot of tireless work on the trail, both on campus and on the road, helped set up a memorable recruiting surge in May.

In-state offensive tackle Jakari Lipsey spurned LSU, UCLA, Tennessee and others, committing to Michigan May 2. He was one of 11 recruits to pick the Wolverines that month. Michigan's 2027 class is now up to 16 members and ranked No. 10 nationally in mid-June with 11 blue-chip pledges (four or more stars) already in the boat.

From Rivals Top 100 wide receiver Quentin Burrell to priority four-star running back Tyson Robinson, the Wolverines managed to land some of the most coveted prospects on their recruiting board before official visits.

Now, Michigan sits in the thick of several heavyweight recruiting battles and will have the chance to set off some fireworks this summer. A top-10 finish to this class sits within reach for the Wolverines.

Kamden Lopati, Rivals' No. 115 prospect and No. 10 quarterback nationally, flipped from Illinois to Michigan.
PHOTO COURTESY RIVALS

Quarterback

Commits: 1
Need: 2

Landing Kamden Lopati was a massive recruiting win for the Wolverines. He's completely locked in with Michigan and continues to play a very active recruiting role in the class. The Salt Lake City (Utah) West standout took an official visit to Navy this summer because his brother is on the team, but U-M knew about and supported that trip. The No. 115 recruit and No. 10 QB nationally per Rivals is a dual-threat signal-caller with a linebacker's frame. He has Elite 11-caliber arm talent and the athleticism to make plays as a rusher as well.

Michigan wants to add a second signal-caller to the class, and former Utah commit Thaddeus Thatcher is being considered. Quarterbacks coach Koy Detmer Jr. recruited him to the Utes and offered this spring. Thatcher is very interested in the program, and Michigan is in a good position to land the Las Vegas Arbor View standout.

Running Back

Commits: 2
Need: 2

Running backs coach Tony Alford locked in on his top targets this spring and wrapped up a pair of commitments before official visits. The Wolverines are very excited about Tyson Robinson, the No. 15 running back nationally and the No. 212 recruit overall. He was a Top 100 prospect at one point out of Brandon (Miss.) High but played through a serious lower-body injury as a junior and dropped in the rankings. Robinson is a legitimate all-purpose back who is completely healthy now and looks like a breakout candidate for a strong senior season.

He will team up with in-state athlete Lundon Hampton in Michigan's backfield. Hampton plays both ways for Grand Rapids Kenowa Hills High, but the Wolverines like the 6-foot-2 rising senior as a running back. He's an explosive athlete who picked the program over Michigan State, Kentucky and Iowa among others. The Wolverines will work hard to hold onto their two commits, but they're set at this position for the 2027 cycle.

Wide Receiver

Commits: 1
Need: 3

Michigan wants to pull off a couple of massive recruiting wins at the wide receiver position after securing a pledge from Quentin Burrell, the No. 83 recruit and No. 15 wide receiver in the country. The 6-2 pass catcher from Chicago Mount Carmel was a top priority for receivers coach Micah Simon as soon as he joined the staff, and Burrell ended up committing in May after just one official visit to Arizona State. Notre Dame and Missouri were also contenders, but Michigan grabbed the momentum in his recruitment this spring and never gave it up.

Top 100 in-state receiver Dakota Guerrant is one of the program's top targets regardless of position. The Wolverines are doing everything they can to keep the nation's No. 46 recruit and No. 6 wideout at home. He's an elite receiver prospect out of Harper Woods High, and U-M sits squarely in his top two with Oregon. He plans on committing in July, but his recruitment will go until signing day. Guerrant and his family will watch Michigan's offense closely this fall to see if the Wolverines have a scheme that will set him up for success.

Four-star wide receiver Damani Warren also remains a priority for Simon and the rest of the staff. They recruited the Las Vegas standout during their time at Utah and really piqued his interest during a spring visit. The No. 395 recruit nationally lives with Thatcher, and the possibility of playing together at the collegiate level intrigues them. Texas A&M is the other main contender in his recruitment, and he left his official visit with the Aggies without making a commitment. Look for U-M to make a big move during his Victors Weekend official visit, June 19-21.

Tight End

Commits: 1
Need: 2

Michigan might only sign one true tight end this cycle. The Wolverines already landed their top target when they flipped former Alabama pledge Colt Lumpris. He's the No. 277 recruit and No. 11 tight end in the country, and Michigan was very excited to secure his pledge. The Lawrenceville (N.J.) School standout is a 6-foot-7 pass catcher who will continue to refine his tight end skill set but should be able to contribute early as a big receiver.

The Wolverines are also continuing to push for three-star Utah native Christian Hanshaw. He's a traditional in-line tight end who picked up a wave of Power Four offers this year. BYU was once viewed as the main competition for him, but it sounds like the Cougars are fading a bit in this process. That puts Michigan in a great spot going into his Victors Weekend official visit. He's really the only other tight end target on the board and plans on serving a two-year mission after high school, so he's essentially a 2029 recruit.

Offensive Line

Commits: 3
Need: 4

Securing an early pledge from Jakari Lipsey was a major recruiting win for offensive line coach Jim Harding. The Kalamazoo (Mich.) Loy Norrix star watched his recruitment blow up over the past year, but Michigan always looked like the favorite. Harding made him an immediate priority after joining the staff. At one point, he wanted to take official visits to UCLA, LSU and Tennessee. Michigan closed strong to secure his pledge. He's the No. 129 recruit and No. 11 offensive tackle in the country.

Three-star interior offensive lineman Louis Esposito is the longest-standing pledge in Michigan's 2027 class. He earned an offer at camp last summer and continues to grow and develop into someone who could finish the cycle as a four star prospect.

Esposito, the son of former Michigan defensive line coach Lou Esposito (now with the NFL's Baltimore Ravens), is one of the program's most vocal recruiters and he attends school just a short drive away at Saline (Mich.) High.

Sidney Rouleau rounds out the current group of commitments. Rivals considers him an interior prospect, but the Wolverines see him as a tackle. He measured close to 6-foot-7 during his official visit and continues to reshape and develop his frame. He's also completely locked in, and his family loved his official visit.

Rivals300 interior offensive lineman Lincoln Mageo is the main offensive line target left on the board, and his recruitment is shaping up well for the Wolverines. He holds a ton of reverence for Harding, and they have built a great relationship over the past few months. His official visit went well, and while Utah and Washington will continue to push, it will be tough to beat Michigan for the Oceanside (Calif.) High offensive lineman.

Kalamazoo (Mich.) Loy Norrix standout Jakari Lipsey, the country's No. 95 player and No. 8 offensive tackle, was the Wolverines' highest-rated commit as of mid-June.

PHOTO BY ETHAN MCDOWELL

Defensive Line

Commits: 1
Need: 2

Top 100 defensive lineman Xavier Muhammad committed to Michigan in May — one of the most surprising additions to the class this spring. The No. 88 recruit and No. 8 defensive lineman in the country scheduled a jam-packed slate of official visits, but he didn't need to see much before deciding Michigan was the home for him in May. A critical in-home visit with defensive tackles coach Larry Black and general manager Dave Peloquin helped secure his pledge. The versatile defensive addition from Houston has sky-high potential, and he's someone whom the Wolverines are really excited about.

Michigan remains in a heavyweight recruiting battle for Seth Tillman, a Rivals300 defensive lineman out of South Carolina. He's the No. 116 recruit and No. 11 D-lineman nationally. Tillman touts the Wolverines, Georgia, Clemson, South Carolina and Kentucky as his finalists and has a commitment date scheduled for July 11. The Wolverines appeared to be fading coming out of his trip to UGA, but they countered with an extremely strong official visit. That weekend in Ann Arbor left a lasting impression and led to U-M surging to the top of his recruitment. Additional momentum shifts could happen before he makes a decision, but Michigan is doing everything right and sits in a very strong spot with one of its most coveted defensive tackle prospects.

Other than those two targets, Michigan continues to keep tabs on SMU commit Amari Vickerson and Alabama pledge AJ Pauley.

Indianapolis Franklin Central's Jayce Brewer, the No. 214 prospect and No. 18 EDGE nationally, chose the Wolverines over defending national champion Indiana.

PHOTO BY ETHAN MCDOWELL

Edge Rusher

Commits: 2
Need: 3

Michigan's staff worked hard to build a relationship with longtime commit Recarder Kitchen early on after the coaching change. The Muskegon (Mich.) High pass rusher never wavered in his pledge and now has a strong connection to the new faces in the building. He's the No. 155 prospect and No. 14 edge nationally but flies a bit under the radar because he doesn't attend many camps or showcases. The Wolverines are fired up about him.

Defensive ends coach Lewis Powell and the rest of the staff helped U-M surge past Indiana to pull off an upset recruiting win for Rivals300 edge rusher Jayce Brewer. The Indianapolis Franklin Central star checks in at No. 214 overall and No. 18 among edges nationally. He's locked in with Michigan.

Now, the Wolverines are zeroing in on their third edge rusher in the class with eyes on Rivals300 prospect Ifeanyi Emedobi. Michigan reached out to him about moving up his OV by a week to June 12, and he changed his visit schedule to make that happen. He's the No. 265 recruit and No. 23 edge rusher nationally out of Fort Wayne (Ind.) Northrop High. Michigan sits in a great spot here.

Three-star edge rusher Jag Ioane also had a Victors Weekend official visit on his schedule.

2027 MICHIGAN COMMITMENTS

Name	Rating*	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Hometown / High School
Jayce Brewer	★★★★	EDGE	6-5	225	Indianapolis / Franklin Central
Quentin Burrell	★★★★	WR	6-2	195	Chicago / Mount Carmel
Louis Esposito	★★★	IOL	6-6	290	Saline, Mich. / Saline
Lundon Hampton	★★★	ATH	6-2	203	Grand Rapids, Mich. / Kenowa Hills
Tavares Harrington	★★★★	S	6-3	180	Chicago / Mount Carmel
Blake Jenkins	★★★	CB	6-0	190	Katy, Texas / Tompkins
Darius Johnson	★★★★	CB	6-1	155	Riverside, Calif. / Notre Dame
Recarder Kitchen	★★★★	EDGE	6-5	240	Muskegon, Mich. / Muskegon
Jakari Lipsey	★★★★	OT	6-5	290	Kalamazoo, Mich. / Loy Norrix
Kamden Lopati	★★★★	QB	6-2	225	West Valley City, Utah / West
Colt Lumpris	★★★★	TE	6-6	240	Tolland, Conn. / Lawrenceville (N.J.)
Xavier Muhammad	★★★★	DL	6-3	265	Houston / South Houston
Tyson Robinson	★★★★	RB	5-9	195	Jackson, Miss. / Brandon
Sidney Rouleau	★★★	IOL	6-5	240	Gatineau, Quebec / The Brook Hill School (Texas)
Brayden Watson	★★★	LB	6-2	190	Buford, Ga. / Buford
Charles Woodson Jr.	★★★	S	5-11	170	Orlando, Fla. / Lake Nona

** Rivals player ratings as of June 18*

Linebacker

Commits: 1
Need: 3

Three-star linebacker Brayden "Tank" Watson was one of assistant coach Alex Whittingham's top targets, and the Wolverines held off a late push from Vanderbilt to land the Buford (Ga.) High standout. He's a former high school safety who also plays a major role at tight end for the national prep powerhouse.

Michigan wants to sign three linebackers in this class and has two prospects coming in for official visits alongside Watson. Four-star target Frederrick Ford ar-

rived on campus for his official visit June 10. He's the No. 242 recruit and No. 21 linebacker in the country according to the Rivals Industry Ranking out of Greenwood (Miss.) High. The Wolverines will have to compete with Ole Miss and LSU for his pledge, but they're building momentum here quickly.

Top 100 Texas Tech commit Jhadyn Nelson is the No. 4 linebacker and No. 41 recruit nationally, and he planned to be on campus for Victors Weekend. He should be considered a long shot, but U-M sees the Houston Langham Creek rising senior as a potential game-changing prospect, and the staff will try to flip him this summer.

Safety

Commits: 2
Need: 3

Michigan picked up two safety commits early this spring that flipped to Ole Miss and Minnesota. Despite that, the secondary class still sits in a great spot.

Surging past Notre Dame, Alabama and others for Rivals300 defensive back Tavares Harrington, the Rivals Industry Ranking's No. 134 prospect and No. 8 safety in the country, was one of the most impressive wins of the recruiting cycle. The Wolverines needed to make up significant ground in his recruitment this spring and did so with two visits that left an extremely strong impression. Safeties coach Tyler Stockton showed the Chicago native a ton of love, and their relationship played a significant role in the Mount Carmel High standout's commitment.

The Wolverines also prioritized and landed three-star legacy safety Charles Woodson Jr. Kentucky made a push, but his recruitment was never in doubt for Michigan. He will follow in his family's footsteps in Ann Arbor.

Now, Michigan has its eyes set on Rivals300 safety Marcus Jones. The No. 197 recruit and No. 17 safety in the country from Pennsylvania had planned to be on campus for Victors Weekend, June 19-21, and the Wolverines are top contenders. North Carolina, Ole Miss and Tennessee will also host him in June. He keeps his recruitment quiet, but there will be a better idea of where U-M stands after the OV.

Michigan planned to host four-star defensive back Larry Moon June 19-21. He's a recent addition to the recruiting board. Rivals considers him a cornerback, but the Wolverines are recruiting him to play safety. Virginia Tech and Georgia Tech have also hosted him for official visits.

Three-star safety Peyton Higginson is someone to keep an eye on later in the cycle. He will visit the program for a game day in the fall. Michigan and BYU are the top contenders for him. He's serving a two-year mission after high school.

Michigan beat out Notre Dame and Alabama for Chicago safety Tavares Harrington, who is ranked as the nation's No. 8 player at his position and the No. 134 recruit overall per the Rivals Industry Ranking.
PHOTO COURTESY TAVARES HARRINGTON

Cornerback

Commits: 2
Need: 3

Cornerbacks coach Jernaro Gilford has landed two of his top four-star cornerback targets — Darius Johnson and Blake Jenkins. Michigan established itself as the favorite for Johnson, the No. 203 recruit and No. 26 cornerback in the country, from Riverside (Calif.) Notre Dame, very early on this year. Gilford was the first coach to offer him a Division I scholarship, and that helped.

Jenkins, the nation's No. 260 prospect and No. 28 cornerback, picked up his Michigan offer in February, and the Wolverines steadily built momentum with the blue-chip prospect out of Katy (Texas) High. His spring visit went well, leading to a Victors Weekend visit. SMU and Vanderbilt held the edge for him at different points over the past couple of months, but when his timeline sped up for an early June commitment, Michigan put on the full-court press and emerged as his choice.

Five-star cornerback Joshua Dobson officially visited Michigan June 12-14, and that might be the most important official visit of the 2027 recruiting cycle. The Wolverines are within striking distance of Texas A&M going into this trip. Dobson is the No. 6 recruit in the country and the No. 2 cornerback nationally. His parents have never been to campus, but if the Wolverines hit a home run on this visit, they could grab the momentum for the elite recruit out of Cornelius (N.C.) Hough High. South Carolina and Auburn are also in the mix.

Monsanna Torbert planned to visit Michigan for Victors Weekend. He moved his visit back a week to attend U-M's biggest recruiting event of the year. The No. 70 recruit and No. 10 cornerback nationally from Cincinnati Princeton High has traveled to Ohio State. If the Wolverines survive that trip, they will have a shot to win this recruitment.

Miami (Ohio) cornerback commit DJ Mitchell previously planned on visiting June 12, but he said his OV has been postponed to the fall. ❑

Joshua Dobson of Cornelius, N.C., is ranked as the No. 6 overall prospect and No. 2 cornerback nationally by Rivals.

PHOTO COURTESY RIVALS

MOST WANTED

The Top 10 Prospects On Michigan's 2027 Board

BY ETHAN MCDOWELL

Michigan's 2027 recruiting class is filling up quickly with 16 commits already pledged to the program through mid-June. The Wolverines will take a focused approach to the rest of this recruiting cycle with eyes on a few major recruiting battles for Rivals Top 100 prospects.

With the target board shrinking by the day, here's a look at 10 of the program's most-wanted recruits to round out the cycle.

Five-star CB Joshua Dobson

Michigan hosted Dobson, the No. 6 recruit in the country, on an official visit June 12-14, and that trip went well. The Wolverines continue to pitch the nation's No. 2 cornerback on what the program has to offer on and off the field and have done everything they can to win this recruitment battle. He and his family remain receptive to that pitch, and U-M continues to close the gap on Texas A&M and South Carolina. Dobson has a tentative July 1 commitment date planned. The Gamecocks host him June 19 to wrap up his official visit schedule, and don't count them out. However, Michigan is building a lot of positive momentum here with North Carolina's top-ranked recruit out of Hough High in Cornelius.

Top 100 WR Dakota Guerrant

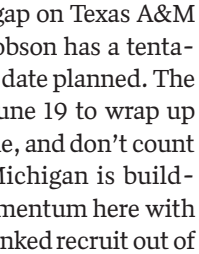
Guerrant is rapidly approaching his summer commitment date, with Oregon as the clear team to beat. He's the No. 1 recruit in Michigan out of Harper Woods High and the No. 38 recruit and No. 7 wide receiver in the country. Michigan has put together a full-court press for the first-team MaxPreps Junior All-American over the past six months, but the Ducks will be tough to beat going into his decision. With that said, expect the Wolverines to push until signing day. If U-M's offense shows improvement, especially in the passing game, then the program should still have a shot to eventually land the elite pass catcher. For now, he appears Oregon bound.

Top 100 CB Monsanna Torbert

Torbert, a former Indiana commit, reopened his recruitment this spring after his offer list blew up. Michigan and Ohio State are the top two schools to keep an eye on right now. The Wolverines host him June 19-21, one weekend after his two-day stay with the Buckeyes. Ohio State grabbed the momentum during his June 12-14 visit and now leads his recruitment. He's the No. 70 recruit in the country out of Cincinnati Princeton High and an extremely versatile defensive back who could play pretty much anywhere in the secondary. His Victors Weekend official visit will be pivotal for the Wolverines. He's the No. 10 cornerback in the class and the No. 3 recruit in Ohio.

Rivals300 DL Seth Tillman

Tillman has a firm July 11 commitment date set with a top five of Michigan, South Carolina, Clemson, Kentucky and Georgia in contention. The Wolverines held the momentum for the No. 116 recruit in the country going into what has been a very fluid recruitment with the Rock Hill (S.C.) South Pointe High standout. Georgia looked like the team to beat for most of this year, but Clemson is U-M's strongest competition down the stretch. The Tigers are quickly building momentum. Michigan left a huge impression on his official visit and will try to maintain that momentum going into his decision. Tillman is the No. 11 defensive lineman in the country.



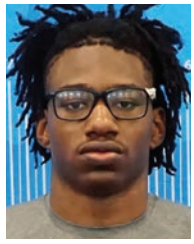
Rivals300 S Marcus Jones

Michigan offered Jones this spring and started to prioritize one of the top rising

defensive backs in the country. He ranks No. 197 nationally after racking up a strong list of Power Four offers. The No. 17 safety nationally out of Malvern (Pa.) Haverford School took official visits to North Carolina, Tennessee and Ole Miss. He now plans on heading to Ann Arbor for Victors Weekend. Jones keeps his recruitment pretty quiet, but his uncle played for the Volunteers, and they're certainly a program to monitor closely. Michigan safeties coach Tyler Stockton visited him twice in Pennsylvania this spring, and the Wolverines built a strong connection with him and his family. Now, they need to capitalize on those bonds once he's on campus.

Rivals300 EDGE Ifeanyi Emedobi

Emedobi made it to campus for the first time June 12-14. Michigan built a great connection with the Fort Wayne (Ind.) Northrop High standout in the preceding month, and that catapulted the program into contention. His official visit only reinforced those positive vibes between the Wolverines and the No. 265 recruit and No. 23 edge rusher in the country. He's one of the most unique athletes in the class at 6-2, 214 pounds with an 81-inch wingspan and over 11-inch hands to go along with a 4.48 40-yard dash. Penn State and Minnesota are also in the mix, but Michigan holds the edge here.



Four-star LB Frederrick Ford

Michigan jumped into the mix for Ford late, but the Wolverines were working to get the 6-foot-5 rising senior on campus for a Victors Weekend official visit. The No. 242 recruit and No. 21 linebacker in the country out of Greenwood (Miss.) High stopped by Ann Arbor June 10 for an unofficial visit, and that trip went super well. Tennessee, Ole Miss and Mississippi State also hosted him on OVs. His recruitment feels very open, and linebackers coach Alex Whittingham is working hard to build some momentum around Michigan. The Wolverines have their foot in the door but likely need to get him on campus again to secure a commitment. LSU is slated to host him June 19-21.

Four-star WR Damani Warren

Michigan and Warren are the top two for Warren as his recruitment nears its end. The four-star pass catcher from Las Vegas Arbor View knows the Wolverine staff extremely well. His high school quarterback and close friend, Thaddeus Thatcher, was a Utah commit, and Micah Simon recruited him to the Utes as well. Now, they're both priority targets for the Wolverines. He's the No. 404 recruit in the country at 6-4, 210 pounds. Warren used to be a Top 100 prospect, but injuries kept him from showing off his talent for most of his high school career. Michigan remains extremely high on him, and a spring trip to Ann Arbor established U-M as a team to watch in his recruitment. Texas A&M made a strong push on its official visit that the Wolverines needed to counter during Victors Weekend.

Four-star CB Larry Moon

Moon is a recent addition to Michigan's defensive back board, and he's quickly emerging as a key target for the Wolverines. He was scheduled to visit Ann Arbor for Victors Weekend, with the program trying to gain momentum with the 5-foot-11 IMG Academy standout. Rivals considers him a cornerback, but Michigan is recruiting him as a safety. Georgia Tech and Virginia Tech hosted him the first two official visit weekends. Michigan will have the final in-person pitch with the No. 369 recruit in the country. Moon plays his high school football in Florida, but he hails from Aliquippa, Pa.

Rivals300 OL Lincoln Mageo

Lincoln Mageo is Michigan's top target to round out its offensive line class this summer. He was on commit watch for the Wolverines going into his June 5 official visit and, while he didn't commit during the visit, the Wolverines are in a good position with the Oceanside (Calif.) High standout. He's the No. 242 recruit and the No. 16 interior offensive lineman in the class. Utah and Washington are also in the mix here, but Michigan remains the heavy favorite going into his July 11 decision. ❑

Michigan is in a strong position with Oceanside (Calif.) High's Lincoln Mageo, the nation's No. 16 interior offensive lineman. He is set to announce his college choice July 11.

PHOTO BY ETHAN MCDOWELL

10 Elite 2028 Prospects To Watch

BY ETHAN MCDOWELL

Michigan hopes to sign its second top-10 recruiting class in three years during the 2027 cycle. The new coaches dealt with NCAA recruiting penalties from the previous staff, a delayed start and a lack of recruiting momentum due to last year's scandal.

Despite all of that, the Wolverines checked in with the No. 4 class in the Big Ten and the No. 12 class nationally through mid-June. Next year, hopes should be sky-high for U-M's 2028 recruiting cycle.

The state of Michigan is loaded with seven blue-chip recruits, including the No. 2 offensive tackle in the Rivals Industry Ranking. Utah, familiar stomping grounds for this staff, also boasts one of its strongest classes in recent memory.

Michigan's recruiting footprint will be filled with elite prospects this year, giving the Wolverines a chance to sign a really strong class. Here are 10 recruits from the 2028 class to keep an eye on over the next 18 months.

Detroit Cass Tech's Antijuan Wilkes Jr. is rated by Rivals as the No. 6 prospect in the country and the No. 1 offensive tackle and player in Michigan in the 2028 cycle.

PHOTO COURTESY RIVALS

Five-Star QB Jayden Wade

The Wolverines are trying to flip the No. 1 rising junior quarterback in the country. Wade committed to Georgia last November and remains solid with the Bulldogs, but Michigan is trying to change that. He recently told Rivals that he plans on visiting Ann Arbor soon. The No. 6 overall recruit in the Rivals Industry Ranking is from Los Angeles but plays his high school football for IMG Academy in Bradenton, Fla. LSU is also trying to flip the 6-3, 195-pound signal-caller. Michigan spent a ton of time at IMG this spring, and now the staff will have a chance to make a strong in-person impression on the second-team MaxPreps Sophomore All-American.

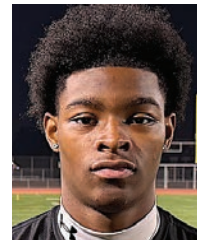
Top 100 OT Maui Tonata

Tonata is the Rivals Industry No. 1 tackle in the country and the No. 15 recruit overall. Michigan offered him this spring, and we expect the Wolverines to play a role in the Orem (Utah) High standout's recruitment. He's a 6-5, 315-pound prospect and the top-ranked recruit in his home state. Michigan has a great connection with his high school program and continues to recruit several of his teammates. He holds an elite offer list that also includes Notre Dame, Miami, Alabama, Oregon and many others. Tonata keeps his recruitment pretty quiet, but expect a visit to Michigan at some point down the line.

Top 100 OT Antijuan Wilkes Jr.

Wilkes is Rivals' No. 6 recruit in the country and its top-ranked tackle. Michigan built positive momentum with the Detroit Cass Tech standout this spring. The 6-5, 265-pound tackle grew up rooting for Ohio State and Alabama. Still, U-M always caught his attention because of its proximity to home. A couple of spring visits solidified Michigan as an early top contender for the No. 1 recruit in the state. He returned to campus June 9 to watch his school play in a 7-on-7 tournament, and he continues to build a great connection with the coaching staff. Michigan will be in the mix here until the end, but he will go through a national recruitment before making any decisions. Wilkes plans to visit six of his top 12 schools this summer.

Top 100 WR Deandre Bidden



Bidden is a longtime top target for Michigan, and he spent a lot of time around the program this past year. He attended multiple game days, a couple of spring practices, the spring game, and he returned to campus for the program's 7-on-7 event. The electric 5-11, 167-pound wide receiver looks forward to watching the new offense in action this fall, and he has a lot of faith in Michigan's new staff. Notre Dame and Ohio State are a couple of programs to keep an eye on

with the Rivals Industry No. 24 recruit and No. 6 receiver in the country, but no one is doing a better job recruiting the No. 2 recruit in Michigan out of Harper Woods High early on. If the passing offense looks solid in the fall, the Wolverines should be the team to beat here.

Top 100 LB Gabriel Player

Michigan offered Player this spring, and he will be one of the program's top overall targets during the 2028 cycle. He ranks No. 40 nationally and No. 3 among linebackers as a 6-3, 190-pound rising junior from Melbourne (Fla.) Eau Gallie High. Texas A&M, Miami, Clemson, Ohio State and others are also pushing here. This will be a difficult recruitment to win, but Michigan will battle for a spot in his top group.

Top 100 EDGE Jayden Bell

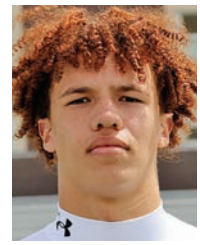
Bell is another top priority in-state target who checks in as a 6-4, 210-pound edge. He's the No. 42 recruit and No. 8 pass rusher in the country out of Bloomfield Hills (Mich.) Brother Rice. The No. 4 recruit in Michigan's 2028 class picked up an offer from the Wolverines and visited this spring. He has his eyes on schools like Oklahoma, Florida, Oregon and Kentucky early on, but U-M definitely is standing out as well, he recently shared with *The Wolverine*. Bell feels like a priority for Michigan, and he likes the program's winning tradition and track record with defensive line development.

Top 100 DL Simon Nuamah

Nuamah's recruitment exploded over the past few months, and he's now the No. 51 recruit in the country with a long list of Power Four offers. The Marion (Mass.) Tabor Academy defensive lineman is the No. 2 recruit in Massachusetts, and he visited the Wolverines for the spring game. That trip left a super strong impression. Nuamah, the No. 7 defensive lineman nationally, hopes to return to Ann Arbor in the fall for a game day.

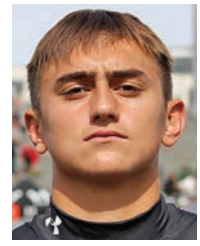
Top 100 TE Tytan McNeal

McNeal also visited Michigan in the spring, and the 6-4, 220-pound tight end from Sammamish (Wash.) Eastside Catholic High left campus with a high opinion of the program. He's the No. 2 tight end in the class and the No. 64 recruit nationally. The coveted prospect with offers from Oklahoma, Miami and many others will "definitely" return to Ann Arbor at some point. He will be one of Freddie Whittingham's priority targets in the 2028 class. McNeal is the No. 2 recruit in Washington.



Top 100 EDGE Major Stokes

Michigan offered and hosted Stokes on a visit this spring and really impressed the No. 74 recruit and No. 10 edge rusher in the country and the No. 2 prospect in Utah. He's teammates with Tonata at Orem High, so expect the Wolverines to spend a lot of time around his school over the next couple of years. Stokes is a physically impressive prospect at 6-5, 237 pounds. He plans on visiting the Wolverines again and has a close connection to the coaching staff already given their Utah and BYU roots. Stokes will be one of the program's top overall targets on the defensive line this year. USC, Oregon, Alabama, Texas A&M and many others have also offered Stokes.



Top 100 ATH Camden Noe

Noe, the No. 68 recruit and No. 2 athlete nationally per Rivals scouts, hails from Portage (Mich.) Central, grew up a U-M fan and still roots for the Wolverines. The 6-3, 210-pound athlete holds offers on both sides of the ball. After watching him work out this spring, Michigan likes him at tight end but just wants him on the team as a football player. Ohio State and Iowa also impressed him this spring, and Notre Dame just offered him in June, but Michigan has strong connections to the No. 5 recruit in the state that should help them here. ❑

Jayden Bell is another top priority in-state target for the Wolverines. Rivals ranks him as the No. 49 prospect and No. 6 pass rusher in the country out of Bloomfield Hills (Mich.) Brother Rice.

PHOTO COURTESY RIVALS

Landing Kyle Whittingham Is 'Good Fortune'

Whittingham, who posted a 177-88 record in 21 seasons at Utah, brings a competitive edge in his new role at Michigan.

PHOTO BY TY KORNBLUE

There have been six Michigan head coaches since Bo Schembechler retired, and four of them were fired — Gary Moeller (1990-94), Rich Rodriguez (2008-10), Brady Hoke (2011-14) and Sherrone Moore (2024-25). The only two that left on their own were Lloyd Carr (1995-2007; retired) and Jim Harbaugh (2015-23; NFL), both of whom brought national championships back to Ann Arbor.

Out of 21 coaches to exit Michigan, Moore's departure was the messiest.

"It's the only one that involved law enforcement and the courts, so yes, it's No. 1," Michigan football historian and best-selling author John U. Bacon noted.

As Moore's tenure went along, certainly given the reason for his firing, an inappropriate relationship with a staff member, it became apparent he wasn't fit to lead the program. Moore became the first Michigan head coach to be let go after just two seasons since Tad Wieman in 1928.

Michigan's top two money-making sports, football and men's basketball, changed coaches in a two-year period, with Dusty May taking over for Juwan Howard and Kyle Whittingham replacing Moore.

Michigan went 17-8 with Moore at the helm, hardly a disaster on the field. It went 8-24 in Howard's final season, but it also won a Big Ten title and made the Elite Eight and Sweet 16 under his leadership.

May has already led Michigan to the 2026 national title, and Whittingham is widely viewed as a top-10 coach in the sport. Given the prior circumstances in each instance, Michigan made exceptional hires.

"You might argue, the untimely firings of both Juwan Howard and Sherrone Moore might have spared Michigan fans a few more years of, at best, mediocre basketball and football, and maybe worse," Bacon said. "To rebound with Dusty May and Kyle Whittingham, that's like pulling out a plum in both cases. Just amazingly good fortune, but also well-handled."

Whittingham is 66, meaning he's not only the oldest Michigan head man at the time of hiring but, come September, will be the oldest to coach a game. While he flirted with retirement in recent years, he didn't want to stop coaching. The Utah administration said he could return in 2026, but under strict stipulations that were, frankly, insulting to a legend like Whittingham. The stars aligned for him to land in Ann Arbor, where he has a lot of motivation.

"How is he going to fare at Michigan?" Bacon asked. "He is without question — it's not even close — the oldest Michigan football coach by far. Bo was about 60 when he stepped down, but he had heart issues and so on. This guy, not only does he not drink beer, he doesn't drink Diet Coke. He's going to outlive us all. You meet the guy, he's still in phenomenal shape.

"He also has, very importantly, fire in the belly. He's got something to prove. He's not spoken publicly about it, but my strong sense is he was not thrilled with how it was handled at Utah on his way out. And he'd love to prove them wrong and push them aside, basically. He's got a golden opportunity to do exactly that."

"He's one of the most competitive people that you'll ever know, and I think you see that on the sidelines," said Utah beat writer Josh Furlong of KSL.

The resources at Michigan are at another level, something Whittingham has said himself, but the way his teams have played lines up almost exactly with what Michigan has been.

"He believes in physicality, he believes if you win on the line of scrimmage, you have the best chance to win the game," Furlong explained.

The San Luis Obispo, Calif., native posted a 177-88 record in 21 seasons at Utah, propping the Utes up as a powerhouse in three different conferences. He went undefeated, 13-0, in 2008, and had eight double-digit win campaigns.

Imagine what he can do with the talent Michigan attracts.

The Wolverines landed the No. 1 overall recruit in the 2025 class, sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood, who's entering his second year as the starter. The Utes were never in the running for a prospect of that caliber.

There's enough firepower around Underwood to believe that if the quarterback elevates his game to be a top half of the Big Ten signal-caller, the Wolverines could be playoff bound, even with a tough schedule. While he has improvements to make, he's got 13 games of experience under his belt.

"Most freshmen, when they make mistakes, do so on Tuesdays, when no one is watching," Bacon noted. "They don't make them on the biggest stage in college football."

Underwood's were on full display last season, and he should be better off for it.

Whittingham and Co. will have to go through some tough opponents, but he's done so in the past, surprising the college football world.

"You've gone from one of the softest to one of the hardest, and Whittingham could be two games better than Sherrone Moore last year and have three more losses because of what you're facing," Bacon said. "It's not just the quality of the opponents, but the home and away aspect, as well."

But nobody would be surprised if Michigan was playing in December and January because Whittingham has elevated his teams throughout his career.

"This worked out, I think, very, very well for Michigan fans," Bacon said. ❑

Staff writer Clayton Sayfie has covered Michigan athletics for *The Wolverine* since 2019. Contact him at Clayton.Sayfie@on3.com and follow him on X (Twitter) @CSayf23.

Bryce Underwood's Next Step

Sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood needs to take the next step for Michigan football.

Figuratively and literally.

Last season, Underwood took the first step, even if it was a sloppy one. The Maize and Blue faithful hoped that Underwood, as the No. 1 prospect in his class and one of the most heralded true freshmen in program history, would raise Michigan's offense from the heap of rubble it had been in the prior season. He did it. U-M jumped from 94th to 49th in Offensive SP+ and from tied-for-last (133rd) to tied-for-69th in yards per pass attempt. Nothing spectacular, but it was more respectable. Underwood interchanged tantalizing dimes with poor footwork and reads while the Wolverines' defense propped up the team with a top-15 unit against a relatively soft schedule.

Underwood needs to be more consistent and reliable in 2026, and he must be ready to elevate Michigan's offense further than he did a year ago. Arm strength aside, the biggest difference he could potentially make is with his legs as a runner.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

This season, Underwood needs to be more consistent and reliable, and he must be ready to elevate Michigan's offense further. The Wolverines' defense has more uncertainty, particularly in the front seven after much turnover, and their slate should be much stingier. Michigan will not be able to rely on its defense to smother opponents all game to rack up wins. Antithetical of the DNA of Michigan football, its offense may be the better group that needs to generate points to carry the team to victories. And Michigan's offense has enough weapons to do it in running backs Jordan Marshall and Savion Hiter and receivers in Andrew Marsh and JJ Buchanan.

But it will come down to Underwood, new head coach Kyle Whittingham and his assistants.

This offseason, there has been a lot of commotion about whether Underwood is ready. Former NFL safety Eric Weddle, who played for Whittingham at Utah, created headlines when he panned Underwood after watching him at a spring practice, and the sophomore signal-caller had an underwhelming spring game when he went 3-for-9 passing for only 22 yards. There are understandable questions about whether his footwork, decision-making, touch and rhythm will improve, especially with a new offensive staff, including having a quarterback coach after not having one last year.

But for all the questions about his arm, the biggest difference he could make is with his legs.

Underwood is a dual threat. Yes, he has a rocket for an arm. But he can make game-changing plays when he tucks the ball and heads upfield. There is no better example of this than his 37-yard touchdown scamper that fooled and split the Nebraska defense last September. He finished with 6 rushing scores last season — the most by a Wolverine quarterback since 2013. Underwood has speed that scares opposing defenses.

However, former head coach Sherrone Moore was very reluctant to run his true freshman quarterback. Even though Underwood tallied 88 carries last season, Pro Football Focus counted 40 of them as scrambles and 22 as sacks. If that math is correct, only 26 were designed runs — an average of 2 per game. Moore defended this approach by citing the lack of other viable quarterbacks on the roster, saying, "If you run your quarterback, you better have two."

Yet Underwood is not an undersized quarterback that can be battered down and prone to injury with numerous hits. He is 6-foot-4, 228 pounds and resembles the build of Cam Newton. He is big enough to take the hits and deliver his own as he bruises his way to positive yards for U-M.

While Moore and the prior staff did not take advantage of this weapon, it would be a surprise if Whittingham and his offensive coordinator, Jason Beck, do the same. Whittingham and Beck were not shy about calling runs for their signal-callers at Utah last season. Devon Dampier was fifth among Power Four quarterbacks with 142 run attempts, and only 32 of them were scrambles (24) or sacks (8). That is 110 designed quarterback runs for the starter only. That does not even include backup quarterback Byrd Ficklin's 66 carries, 59 of which were intentional, per PFF. That is 169 total designed quarterback runs, nearly five times more than the number Underwood had.

If Whittingham and Beck open that door for Underwood, it should add another dimension to Michigan's offense. Not only will opposing defenses need to account for junior Jordan Marshall and freshman Sevion Hiter on the ground, they will need to worry about when Underwood stretches the defense horizontally with his legs. Then, as defenses adjust to try to stop Underwood's legs and crouch closer to the box, it could and should open bigger windows for Underwood to hit his receivers for big plays.

It well could all come together in the air for Underwood: footwork, rhythm, reads and release. If it happens, Underwood could guide this Wolverines team back to the College Football Playoff.

But don't be surprised if it happens because Whittingham and Beck let him take that next step with his legs, not just his arm. ❑

Staff writer Drew Hallett has covered Michigan athletics since 2013. Contact him at drew.c.hallett@gmail.com and follow him on X (Twitter) @DrewCHallett.

Michigan Finally Feels Like Michigan Again

There was one thing you never worried about when guys like Bo Schembechler and Lloyd Carr were running the show in Ann Arbor:

The culture.

No program is or has ever been perfect, of course. Schembechler's Michigan, though, earned the respect of not just the coaches in the Big Ten, but also his peers around the country. There wasn't a hint of scandal, no "in the news for the wrong reasons" or bending of the rules.

Gray areas? Forget it. Not even light pearl. Not only did he not cross any lines, but Schembechler was so far from those lines he'd have needed a cab to get there. To him, "Only Fans" simply meant an afternoon at the golf course with high paying donors (Old-timers, Google it if you don't get it. On second thought … don't. Maybe ask your grandson).

Head coach Kyle Whittingham said he's "excited to quell the drama … get things back on track … have it be all about football, what we're going to accomplish on the field. I think the players are eager to do that, too."

PHOTO BY TY KORNBLUE

As for Carr, when the Wolverines won a national title in 1997, many around the country expressed their admiration that a program that did it "the right way" was able to reach the pinnacle.

So, yeah — the last several years have been tough, even with the Big Ten titles and 2023 national championship. While it was clear the Jim Harbaugh allegations were overblown, and we'd never — *never* — give back what were some special years, there was a stretch when we'd wake up in the morning and hold our breath before we read the morning news.

Last year was the lowest of the low points, and we don't need to revisit it. It was clear, though, that the Michigan fanbase needed a hero to recapture the moral high ground they once occupied.

Enter Kyle Whittingham, replacing Sherrone Moore. When we say he's cut from the same cloth as Schembechler and Carr, we mean the same section of the same roll.

Forget about the scandalous. As one colleague quipped following his hiring, "Thank God — he follows five women on social media, and they're all members of his family."

When new Michigan defensive coordinator Jay Hill, a longtime Whittingham disciple as a player and an assistant, told us he thought "Whitt" was "just what Michigan needed," we couldn't have agreed more.

"The 'Michigan Man' persona … I've been studying up on it and all the tradition," Whittingham said on the "Wake Up Barstool" show. "I've been a Michigan fan forever, since I was 7 years old. I watched the Michigan-Ohio State game, watched those winged helmets come out of the tunnel, Bo versus Woody [Hayes]. I was intrigued from that point on. I've been following Michigan for a lot of years.

"I'm excited to quell the drama, I guess you can say, and get things back on track … have it be all about football, what we're going to accomplish on the field. I think the players are eager to do that, too."

Whittingham admitted pleasant surprise at the four- and five-star talents he inherited, not sure what to expect. There were no prima donnas or guys with entitlement — just a group of kids who wanted the program's perception back to what was promised when they were recruited.

He had strength coach Doug Elisaia work them hard, and Whittingham and his staff coached them even harder.

And the players loved every minute of it.

"I truly think this is one of the closer teams we've had, and we haven't even been with each other that long," junior running back Jordan Marshall said in mid-June. "I think the guys are really just excited about the process and know the chance we have as a team.

"When we have guys like [senior Utah cornerback transfer] Smith Snowden coming up and saying, 'Wow, we're *close*' — this feels different."

And how it's supposed to feel at Michigan. We took it for granted when Carr, the first coach some of us covered at U-M, was in charge that it would always be that way. That Whittingham made it a point to meet with him after he was hired was another positive in a plethora of them since his hiring.

"What a guy," Whittingham said. "He's just a tremendous human being — sharp, funny. I just really enjoyed my conversation with him."

Word from the Carr camp was the former U-M patriarch was equally impressed with Whittingham. That stamp of approval may not mean much to the younger generation, but for us veterans, it's everything.

It feels like the old guard is back in charge of Michigan football, and that's about the highest compliment we can pay. ❑

Chris Balas has been with *The Wolverine* since 1997. Contact him at cbalas@thewolverine.com and follow him on X (Twitter) @Balas_Wolverine.

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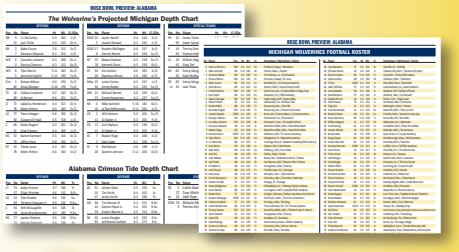
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